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SEPT., 1905.

No. 1100.

Published Every
Month.

M. J. IVERS & CO., Publishers,
(JAMES SULLIVAN, PROPRIETOR),
379 Pearl Street, New York.

10 Cents a Copy.
\$1.00 a Year.

Vol. LXXXVII.

619



"I HOPE I MAY EXPIRE IF IT ISN'T THAT OLD BUCCANEER KIT BANDY, KING OF FRAUDS AND PRINCE O' MOUNTAINERS."

Kit Bandy and Co.,

THE BORDER DETECTIVES;

OR,

The Big Wipe Out at Hermit-Dome.

BY OLL COOMES.

CHAPTER I.

THE MOUNTAIN FAIRY.

SOUTHWARD through a deep, narrow canyon of the great mountains two men were leisurely riding and discussing the topics incident to their surroundings.

The midday sun shone down with unusual splendor into the grim defile, dispelling the murky shadows that were wont to lurk there at all hours, save when the god of day stood upon the zenith, warming into new life both animate and inanimate nature. Birds of bright plumage and sweetest song disported themselves on airy wing and sung or whistled in frolicsome glee as though they were having a merry-making or giving a concert for the benefit of the two horsemen. The foliage of the few trees that grew along the way, and of the bushes that sprung from the crevices of rocks, and the acres of vines that festooned the rocky walls on either side the pass or swept downward like green and scarlet drapery, glowed and rustled in a silvery sheen of quivering light.

The horsemen were not indifferent to this transitory beauty of the defile, for they had been following it when the twilight shadows hung deep around them and wolfish forms fitted before and behind them, and owl wings rustled ominously in the rocky crevices overhead.

As their general appearance indicated, both horsemen were men of the border. The elder of the twain we have met before, and no further introduction will be needed when we say that he was the redoubtable Old Tom Rattler—self-styled the Red River Epidemic. He was mounted upon his famous horse Comet, whose "weather-beaten" appearance, like his master's thin, sharp face, belied the mettle that was in him.

Rattler's companion was known in Deadwood and the outlying camps as Philip, the Miner, or One-Armed Phil. He was a man of perhaps six-and-twenty, a little above the medium height, slender and straight as an Indian. His face was covered with a full beard. He had a pleasant blue eye from which shone the light of a resolute and determined spirit. As his name indicated, he had but one arm, his left being off between the elbow and the shoulder. He was dressed in a new suit of buckskin and armed with a pair of revolvers.

As they rode along and the sun swung squarely over the pass before them, Old Rattler said: "That's the first I've seed the face of old Sol to-day, and he beams down upon us in genial smiles."

"Yes," replied One-Armed Phil, "and I should like to take dinner before the sun gets out of the canyon, for I never did like to eat shadows."

"Sunshine onto a feller's grub *does* make it a leetle more palatable, I confess, Philip," replied Rattler; "and I think your wish can be gratified, for yander lies the crystal spring we've been endeavorin' to reach glowin' in the sunlight like a big silver dollar in a nigger's palm. Whoa, Comet, my old Pegasus! here we slake our thirst, rest our wearied bones, and tinue."

The two horsemen drew rein by the little spring that boiled out from under a great rock and dismounted. They watered their horses and then turned them out to graze on the grass that grew here and there in bunches.

Then seating themselves the bordermen took from their packs some food and began their dinner. They ate and conversed with the leisure and apparent satisfaction of men who were in no hurry, and who relished their plain, cold viands. They also manifested an indifference to their surroundings that was evidence of a perfect ease of mind so far, at least, as dangers were concerned.

When their repast was at length finished, One-Armed Phil took a small tin cup from his pack and, reaching out, filled it with cold, sparkling water from the spring.

"Have a drink, Rattler?" he asked, handing the cup out toward his companion.

"If ye please, Philip," answered Rattler, and reaching out he took the cup; but just as he did so, something struck the vessel with a "click," the water burst from either side of it, and simultaneously the clear report of a rifle came to their ears.

"Great Rosycrusians!" burst from the lips of Old Tom Rattler, as the two sprung to their feet, drew their revolvers and glanced around them for the unknown foe who had sent a bullet through the cup within a few inches of Rattler's body.

Before they had discovered the source of the shot, a ringing outburst of musical laughter fell upon their ears, and looking in the direction whence it came they were completely startled and confused to see a slender female figure stand-

ing on a ledge of rocks high up on the opposite side of the valley looking toward them, her face aglow with rippling smiles. In her hand she held a small rifle, which she proceeded to reload as she stood regarding the two puzzled and confused men.

This strange being was a young girl—a mere child, of not over fourteen years of age, with a petite and graceful figure. Her sun-browned face was decidedly handsome, and her laughing black eyes told of a light heart and the merry, blithesome spirit of a mischievous little madcap. Her dark hair, that lay low upon her temples, was gathered back and hung in one long braid down her back. She was dressed in a frock of green that corresponded well with the color of the foliage around. It was short, reaching just below her knees. Her limbs and feet were incased in buckskin tastily ornamented with various-colored beads. At her side, by means of a strap passing over her shoulder, hung a little beaded pouch, from which she took ammunition to reload her rifle.

"A female!—a girl!—a child!" exclaimed One-Armed Phil, who had first recovered his power of speech.

"And a lily-lipped hummer she is, too!" declared Rattler.

"The murderous little wretch! who can she be?"

"I'll ax her," said Rattler, and then to the unknown girl he shouted: "You owdacious little rascal, whar on earth did you drop from?"

Again the girl broke into a peal of merry laughter, and the echoes caught up the sound and repeated it until a hundred hidden wood-nymphs seemed laughing in glee at the astounded bordermen.

Old Rattler wiped the perspiration from his brow, glanced at his companion, and then at the provoking little figure on the ledge.

"Did I scare you, old robbers?" the girl finally called out, in a clear, musical voice.

"No, you young scamp," replied Old Rattler, "but you come mortal nigh shootin' me through the heart. Don't you fling lead 'round kind o' reckless, gal?"

"I generally know where I'm shooting," the girl responded, "and if you don't believe I can shoot right where I want to, stand still and see me cut that top button off your tunic."

"Go 'long! I'll do no such a thing, you little wild-eyed heifer! I believe you're a bloody outlawess."

"It's not so—I'm not an outlaw!" the girl declared indignantly, with a stamp of her little foot.

"Well, who are you, then?"

"My name's Gypsy," she answered.

"Gypsy—what?"

"Wild Gypsy, some folks call me, but I'm not wild—I'm tame as you are."

"Whar the thunder d'ye live?"

"At home, to be sure," was the curt and evasive reply.

"By Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler in a low tone to his friend, "that gal's sharp as a cactus-burr, consarn her; but I do wonder if we can't get her down here?"

"Try a conciliatory tone," suggested Phil.

"Say, Gypsy," called out Rattler, "won't you come here, my little lady?"

"Little lady!" repeated the girl in a voice tinged with no little irony; "you talk nice, old stranger; but what do you want me to come down for?"

"To make love to you," was Rattler's absurd reply; "I'm a real old honey-puddle on the love-make, and you jist ought to come down and hear me."

"I've got a lover," the girl responded with a merry laugh, "and he's more'n a hundred years younger than you are, and he's not ugly, either."

The two bordermen could not help laughing outright.

"Rosycrusians!" Rattler exclaimed in an undertone, "isn't she a clipper, Phil?—an ox-eyed daisy?—a little velvet-throated tempest?"

"She's a bright child, Rattler," replied One-Armed Phil, "and as handsome and fearless as she is smart. I would give anything to know who she is, and where she belongs."

"Maybe by talkin' nice we can coax the information out of the little minx."

"No, you can't, old sinner," exclaimed the little madcap, whose keen ears had caught the borderman's remark.

"Plague take it, gal," remonstrated the old man, "don't be so all-killin' aggravatin'. I wouldn't harm a hair o' your head. I'm Old Tom—"

Further words were here cut short by the girl raising her rifle and firing into the tree-top directly over the bordermen's heads. A demoniac scream coming from the tree, immediately followed the crack of the gun.

Glancing up, the two men saw a huge catamount release its feeble hold on a limb and come crashing to the earth, Old Rattler having to leap aside to prevent it falling upon him.

Wild Gypsy broke into a peal of merry laughter as she saw the two men retreat hastily from near the floundering animal.

Again the two bordermen exchanged significant glances.

"I wonder how much longer that little wench

's goin' to keep us dancin' 'round here like a pair o' wall-eyed insane asylums?"

"She's a fine shot," was Phil's only answer.

"Great Rosycrusians!" the old man cried, "gal, you paralyze me! I'm gittin' dizzy!"

"Bathe your head in the spring then," was the maiden's reply.

"Darn you, gal, you're a Gypsy, sure enough, and if I could only get up there I'd have a kiss if it killed me. Such sass I never heard from a gal— There! by Rosycrusians! she's skipped out, Phil—vanished like the little sunbeam that she is, and we're no wiser than we were, but feel a darned sight foolisher—I do at any rate."

"She was rather provoking, Rattler, I'll admit," replied Phil, "but I would give my supper to know who she is and where she belongs."

"So'd I," declared Rattler, "and if we'd the time I'd find where she belongs before the sun sets. If we return this way, Phil, we'll have to call on Miss Gypsy."

"That's so, Rattler," replied Phil; "but now I'm going to have the drink she has kept me out of, at any rate."

Deprived of his cup by the maiden's bullet, One-Armed Phil advanced to the spring, and dropping upon his hands and knees, leaned forward to drink from the spring; but as he did so, he started back with a startled cry, keeping his eyes fixed upon the water as if held there by some horrible fascination.

Old Rattler stood at his side, and hearing his exclamation, and seeing his queer actions, leaned forward and gazed down into the spring, when he, too, started, for up out of the limpid pool they saw the white startled face of a woman gazing upon them!

For a moment both were speechless, breathless. Rattler was the first to speak.

"My God, Phil!" he exclaimed; "but at the sound of his voice the vision vanished from the spring."

"It's gone, Rattler!" said Phil, his white face betraying no little emotion.

Rattler had the presence of mind to look up. It occurred to him that the vision was the reflection of some one looking from the rock overhead, but if such was true, that person had disappeared, for he saw nothing.

"What do you make of it, Phil?" the old man asked.

"It was nothing but a vision," said Phil.

"Of a beautiful woman's face," added Rattler; "but, Philip, it has given you a shock. You're pale as a ghost."

"It startled me, Rattler, I must confess; but it was surely the reflection of some one on the rock overhead."

"I saw no one, for I looked."

"It can't be this spot is haunted—that the maiden we saw on yonder ledge was a vision."

"Nary vision, Phil, for visions don't go 'round shootin' cups outen men's hands and pluggin' catamounts. No, sir, it war a real, live flesh-and-blood gal, and a toy-tempest one at that."

"Say, men!"

It was the voice of Wild Gypsy that thus addressed them, and, looking, they saw the girl standing on the ledge from which she had so recently vanished; but she now appeared to be excited.

"Well, what is it, Gypsy?" asked Rattler.

"Who are you?" the girl asked.

"Well, my name is Tom Rattler, and this other—"

"Then you'd better be rattling out of there," she broke in, "for there's a lot of outlaws—Red Vultures—coming down the canyon tight as they can pelt it down!"

As she concluded her warning words, the girl again disappeared among the rocks and bushes.

Like statues of stone the two men stood motionless. They heard the clatter and ring of hooved feet in the canyon above them.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Rattler, "horsemen are comin'! perhaps the girl war right. Let us mount and be ready to fly if they should be outlaws."

They took up their packs, fastened them to their saddles and then mounted; nor were they a moment too soon in doing so, for just then the horsemen came in sight.

"They are outlaws!" exclaimed One-Armed Phil.

"Then our salvation lays in the heels o' our horses," said Old Rattler; "go, Comet, like the wild winds!"

Away the old hunter dashed, his companion at his side.

A wild yell, the report of pistols and the whistling of bullets told the two bordermen that they were indeed pursued by a part, at least, of the band of outlaws whom One-Armed Phil, at a glance, recognized as the Red Vultures, by the flaming red collars about their necks, and the queer caps on their heads that were made with long, hooked peaks, in imitation of the heads and beaks of vultures.

"Rattler," said One-Armed Phil, "we're in for a lively race of it, for those fellows are the Red Vultures, and they are noted for the fast horses they ride."

"Let them swoop down upon us, Philip, if they can," was the cool reply of Rattler; "if they take us for tender lambs or dead critters sich as vultures like, they'll be the wu'st startled

birds that ever eat carrion 'bout the time I unlimber Old Epidemic and begin swattin' them in the digestion. This is my way o' fightin', boy—on the run. I first fascinate the foe so's they'll foller up, then I let loose, and if ever you see'd a thundergust—an untamed tempest frolic around in a hay-field, then you can have some idea o' my capacity and Comet's to devastate and destroy. Come, Comet, pat 'er down, old hoss—make this old mountain hum—tramp the fire right outen the earth. Now, Philip, don't he scatter distance behind him nobly, for an old hoss? Don't he reach out greedily for the miles before him. By the Rosycrusians! that's a likely critter you ride, Philip; he holds alongside o' Comet like a star o' the fu'st magnitood; but will his wind last?"

"He's good for a twenty-mile race, Rattler," declared Phil.

"Then come on, you red-necked varlets!" and Rattler deliberately turned his head and waved his cap in the air in defiance to the pursuers, his voice ringing in stentorian notes above the thousand rebounding echoes that went crashing like thunders through the mountains.

CHAPTER II.

A CAMP-FIRE STORY.

In a narrow strip of timber on the banks of the Moreau river, at a point not far from where that stream debouched from the foot-hills of the Rocky mountains into the great plains, a camp-fire was burning, its genial rays of light dispelling the gloom of night from under a cluster of somber pines. Before the fire, in attitudes of ease, reposed three men. Two of these were Old Tom Rattler and One-Armed Phil who, in their race with the Red Vultures two days previous, had not only escaped from the outlaws, but had slain two of their number.

The third person was a young man in years, though a giant in stature. It was Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan of the Great Range, and more than this it is scarcely necessary for us to say to the reader who with us has followed the adventurous footsteps of this brave, gallant and kind-hearted young plainsman before.

It was by appointment that the three had met there under the pines by the Moreau at sunset that evening, and since that time they had passed the hours in telling of the adventures they had had in their journey there.

Old Rattler first narrated the story of their adventures at the mountain spring with the girl, Wild Gypsy, and their pursuit by the outlaws, in which case Rattler and his horse, Comet, had given One-Armed Phil an exhibition of his "cyclone-frolic" fighting. The old borderman was in a happy vein of humor that evening. This enabled him to tell his story in his original style of narrative, which made it highly enjoyable to the Boy Trojan, and, so profusely did he "paint" the whole story from beginning to the end, that One-Armed Phil himself became interested in the old man's vivid powers of exaggeration and skill in word-painting.

After he had finished his story, Stonewall Bob said:

"Well, now I have a story to tell you of an adventure I had in coming here, every word of which is true."

"To be sure," said Rattler, "we plainsmen never tell anything but the plain, naked truth. But go on, lad, and tell it; nothin' kills time so humanely as a good camp-fire story that has the ringin' truth o' the Book o' Revelations in it."

"Well," said Stonewall Bob, "I started for this point two weeks ago. I knew it wouldn't take me all that time to reach here, but I wanted to visit some friends on the way and thought I'd start in plenty of time. Just one week ago in crossing the plains north of the Big Cheyenne I came across a wagon-train consisting of four wagons and seven persons. They were on their way to the gold mines at Deadwood by the Cheyenne river trail, or rather they were angling off in a course to reach that route, they having been deceived into leaving it some days previous by an ignorant guide."

"The train was in charge of a Mr. Mahlon Graves, who had along with him his daughter, Ruth, a young lady of eighteen, and a fairer and more ladylike woman I have never met."

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed Old Rattler, "and I'll bet you got all broke up on her beauty."

"I'll declare," Bob went on, with a smile on his broad, expansive face, "I had a notion to turn outlaw and run off with her to the mountains. I told her father that his daughter's face would bring him trouble if an outlaw or Indian should see her, and even while I was speaking I discovered a number of horsemen off on a distant hill apparently watching us. A spy-glass in possession of the train revealed the fact that they were all Indians but two, and these we recognized as Red Vultures by the red collars around their necks and the ugly caps on their heads. Altogether there were fifteen of them, and by their actions it was apparent that they were intent upon robbery or murder, or both."

"The gold-seekers became alarmed and they begged me to stay with them that day and night, and as their course was not much out of my way, and it was not long until night, I decided to do so, more on account of—"

"The gal—your doom," broke in Rattler, with a pleasant chuckle.

"I must confess," the Boy Trojan continued, "that I am an admirer of the ladies and would sooner lay down my life in defense of innocent womanhood than any other cause under the heavens."

"Bravo!" shouted One-Armed Phil, his blue eyes sparkling with genuine enthusiasm and admiration.

"We encamped a short distance," Bob continued, "from the Cheyenne river, about two hours before sunset. That was the night the great storm swept over the plains of Dakota. The clouds were already piling up against the western sky, black and ominous, so that we had to prepare for the storm as well as the foe. I tell you things looked blue around that camp about sunset. There was not an experienced plainsman in the party, except myself. Mr. Graves had been across the plains once to Pike's Peak, but for all that he knew nothing of prairie-craft. The guide that had started with them from Fort Sully, and led them astray, had been discharged several days before. We ate a cold supper, or rather those did that had any appetite at all. Miss Graves watched the gathering clouds and the shadowy forms on the distant hills with an uneasy, troubled look upon her fair face. We all worked like Turks, but before we had things as we wished them we heard the moan of the storm in the distance, succeeded by a strange roaring noise that proved to be a mighty torrent of water that finally came rolling down the river, filling the stream bank-full. We knew that a water-spout had burst and poured its flood into the river, and yet not a drop of rain had fallen where we were."

"Soon the sky to the west of us became overcast with black, purple clouds, the lightning and thunder became terrific, and then we knew the rain would soon begin to fall. So busy had we been in securing the stock that not a tent had yet been erected, so Miss Ruth was placed in one of the wagons and the tilt securely closed all around. Never did men work as we worked, and between our watching out for the Indians and labor preparing for the storm—with darkness over and around us—we progressed slowly. To make the situation all the more appalling, we suddenly heard a strange roaring sound—a sound I had heard, once before in my life—and knew what it was."

"Men, it's a hurricane!" I shouted; "throw yourselves flat on the earth, face down—quick!"

"As I spoke, I threw myself on the ground and the emigrants did likewise. We scarcely done so when the storm broke over us wild and furious. I heard a crash and, as I thought, a cry mingled with the roar of the storm. I raised my head slightly and saw that two of the wagons had been blown over and with their contents were being scattered over the plain. The other two wagons—one of which sheltered Ruth—I saw in motion sweeping like mad toward the river. In 'parking' the vehicles these two were placed fronting toward the river and in line with the storm, and they had been set in motion and were driven before the wind."

"I realized the maiden's awful danger and attempted to rise and go to her assistance, but the storm flung me back to the earth as violently as though I had been a child. I tried to speak, but the wind took my breath."

"Rosycrusians!" broke in Rattler, with impatience, "talk fast, boy—trot along—what became o' the gal?"

"Be patient, Rattler," Stonewall said, "and I'll get to that in due time. You see the storm was a young prairie-hurricane—quick and furious. It swept by like a mad giant. In a few moments it was gone, and we sprung to our feet confused and terrified. A dead calm almost instantly succeeded the wild dash of the hurricane whose receding shriek could still be heard in the distance. The change was like that from a howling mob of madmen to the chamber of death. Not even the faintest rumble of thunder could be heard, but the whole heavens were ablaze with sheet-lightning that lit up the scene with a lurid glare."

"My God! my child! where is she?" Mahlon Graves cried, when he saw the wagons had been swept away.

"I told him the wind had driven the wagons away, and that I would go at once in search of her. I did not tell him that it had been carried toward the river, and of the fears that filled my breast. I started off at once, though to tell you the truth I never expected to find her alive, if at all, for I was satisfied the wagon had been rolled into the mad, roaring river."

"Just as I started the rain began to fall in a perfect torrent out of the blazing, thunder-rent heavens, but I stopped not for this. I went down to the river and found it bank full and in places creeping out into the grass. Such a confusion of rushing, roaring, falling waters I never heard."

"In the lightning's glare I looked for some vestige of the wagon, but in vain. I then started off on a run down the river through the pelting rain. If any one had seen me they would have declared I was crazy. I had no hopes of finding the girl dead or alive, and yet I was impelled onward as if by some unknown in-

fluence, and that there was an unseen power guiding my footsteps I now have every reason to believe. Perhaps some would call it fate, and others animal instinct, but whatever it was, it hurried me on until I suddenly came in sight of the wagon-box with its canvas tilt intact, floating down the mad, roaring river."

"The question with me now was whether the maiden was in it, and, if so, whether she was dead or alive? At first I was tempted to shout to her, but then I knew I could not make myself heard above the roaring storm and waters, and without a moment's delay I ran down the river ahead of the floating box, plunged into the stream, and struck out like a walrus for an ice-floe. I intercepted the box in the middle of the river, and I was pretty well blown when I laid hands upon it. I did not try to enter it, nor did I make my presence known. So 'fraid was I that the maiden was not there or dead that I hesitated about learning the truth. But hanging to the rear of the box I listened, and to my heavenly joy I heard the girl's voice—heard her praying with all the fervency of a true Christian soul. Still I said nothing, but at once began to work myself like a rudder to a boat, and in obedience to my efforts the box began to edge slowly off toward the north shore. You see the box had floated clear of the running-gear of the wagon when it plunged into the river, and it had weight enough inside to ballast it and keep it in an upright, or natural position. I was nearly half an hour in getting the craft ashore, and as soon as it touched the bank I swam around and climbing out of the water pulled the box ashore, which was not difficult, for the water was just beginning to creep over the bank at that point. I now spoke, calling Miss Graves by name, and a wild, joyful cry answered me. But, would you believe it? as I passed around to the other end of the wagon-box to open the closed tilt, what was my surprise and horror to be confronted by a little weazen-faced Indian warrior that—"

"Oh, crucifixion!" burst from Old Rattler's lips; "whar did the red-rinded varmint come from, anyhow?"

"I don't know," replied Stonewall, "but I do know where the malignant imp went to, for that same power that had led me on to the maiden's rescue was still at work within me, and, quicker than you could bat your eye, I shoved my fist into the varlet's face, and the last I saw of him his carcass was bobbing up and down on the waves of the rushing river like a log. At the same instant Miss Ruth sprang from her prison, and in her wild joy she threw her arms about my neck and breathed out words of heartfelt thanks that are still ringing in my ears."

"I tell you, Tom Rattler, that was a rapturous moment for me, when, with her arms about my neck, I felt her warm breath on my cheek and her wildly fluttering heart beating against my own tumultuous breast; and as I led her back to her father I was the proudest boy that ever walked Dakota soil; and I thought her father would never get through thanking me."

"Of course we were all drenched to the skin, and if ever a camp presented the sorry spectacle of having been 'cycloned,' it was ours. Not a horse was to be seen, and the wagons and their contents were scattered from there to the Gulf of Mexico, and about all we could do was to sit down and await the coming of morning. The night being quite warm we did not suffer anything but disagreeableness from our drenched clothes."

"Everybody tried to accept the situation in good grace, and not a few stories were told and jokes cracked before daylight came; and when it did, finally, our joy knew no bounds. But what a sight was before us! Ruin and desolation, almost, seemed to stare us in the face. We were all day in hunting up our strayed horses, getting our clothing dried and gathering up the scattered effects of the party. Of the four wagons but three were ever gathered together again. Our ammunition was found in good condition, for this was the first thing we had secured when we saw a big storm was brewing."

"The next day we again got started mountain-ward. I had agreed to accompany the train two days, and it was well, perhaps, that I did, for the very first day, along in the afternoon, we were attacked by that same band of Indians and Vultures that'd been hanging off on the hills before the storm. I had espied them long before they reached us, and when they came up we were ready for them, and in two minutes and ten seconds we flaxed them out in fine style, killing and wounding half of their number; but we did not escape without loss. One man was killed, two wounded, and three horses were killed."

"After this fight we had no further trouble, and the next day we reached the Cheyenne Crossing and there came upon a large party bound for Deadwood. This afforded me an opportunity to leave my friends without any fears for their safety, for they had decided to travel together to the city of decayed timbers. But for this you would, in all probability, not have seen me here inside of the next two weeks."

"Reckon you were sorry you struck the other train," said Rattler.

"I must confess that I hated to be separated from Mr. Graves's party," Bob said; "but when I was about to take leave of them, Miss Ruth came to me, her face suffused with embarrassment and her soulful eyes filled with tears, and, in a voice tremulous with emotion, said:

"Mr. Comstock, I am sorry that we are to lose your company, for we fully realize that but for you we would now all be dead. As a token of my regard for your heroic service and gallantry, I desire to decorate you with this badge of honor."

"She then, with her own hands, fastened upon my breast this little gold pin or badge, which bears the word 'Honor' engraved upon it. I thanked her for her kindness, and was about to mount my horse, when she again said:

"Mr. Comstock, that jewel I prize most highly—not for its intrinsic value, but as a keepsake."

"Why part with it then?" I asked; "I will take your word for the deed."

"No, that will not satisfy me," she said. "I give it to you in hopes that within the year you will return it to me in person."

"Ah! that war woman's wit and cunning!" declared Rattler. "I see that gal had fallen in love with you, boy, and she took that means of placin' you upon your honor to have you visit her. A clever trick—a lovely little snare to catch big Bobby Comstock, the Boy Trojan. But of course you promised to return the jewel?"

"Indeed I did," replied Stonewall, "and just as soon as I get back from this trip I'm going to keep my word."

"Poor boy!" said Rattler, with a sigh, addressing One-Armed Phil, "he's a goner. He's no longer Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan, for he who has faced and fought a dozen red-skins successfully goes down before the eyes of a pretty gal; but then his story has been a good one, and now it devolves on you, One-Arm, to spin us off a yarn, for it's quite a while yit till snoozin'-time. You intimated to me t'other day that that empty sleeve o' yours had a history—s'pose you give us that?"

"Yes, pard," added Stonewall Bob, "come, tell us the story."

"Indeed this empty sleeve has a history, friends," said Phil, and the muscles of his face quivered as with a twinge of pain, and his mild blue eyes began to blaze as if a smoldering fire had been stirred up in his breast by some bitter recollection, "but I seldom permit myself to think about it, much less talk about it, for to brood over it makes a demon of me at heart. But now since we are on the subject I will tell you about it. Years ago—"

But here he was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps, and looking up he and his friends saw two men—both strangers—enter the radius of the light and advance toward them addressing them in the friendly familiarity so characteristic of men of the border.

CHAPTER III.

A CAMP-FIRE TRAGEDY.

THE new-comers that had so suddenly cut One-Armed Phil's story short were dressed in citizens' suits of dark-gray material, high-topped boots, and light felt hats with rather narrow brims.

The oldest of the two was a man of perhaps fifty years. He was rather tall, had dark-gray eyes and wore a full, brown beard. His long, straight nose was bestridden with a blood-red scar.

The other was short, and stoutly built—some years younger than his friend, but far less intellectual in general appearance. Neither of them carried any weapons that were visible.

"Hullo! good-evening, folks!" the bearded stranger exclaimed; "I hope you will pardon this unceremonious intrusion of nocturnal nomads."

"No need o' formality on the prairies, strangers," replied Old Rattler, scrutinizing the men closely. "our fireside are free to all disposed to let its light shine on their mugs if they be honest, but seein' you are strangers, what are we to call ye?"

"My name," said the tall man, "is Raney Bradstreet, and my stout chum here is Jim Noel. By profession or calling, or whatever you're a mind to term it, we're a pair of confounded dolt-heads."

"You be pretty hard on yourselves, folks," said Rattler; "why is this thut?"

"I am almost ashamed to tell you," replied Bradstreet, as he and Noel seated themselves before the fire, "but the fact is, we've been lost on the plain for two days and have been following this stream up supposing it was the Belle Fourche."

"And how do you know but what it is?" asked Rattler.

"We came to the conclusion this evening that it was not, for according to our map it makes the wrong turn as we approach the mountains. We decided it was the Owl, or Moreau."

"In that you're right," said Stonewall Bob; "but you're not traveling afoot, are you?"

"No; we left our horses down the river aways, tired almost to death, and we're but little better."

"Gents, make yerselves to home here," said Old Rattler; "we've plenty room, plenty o' ground for beds, and abundance o' sky and darkness for liver, and if ye're hungry eat yer fill from our larder, and drink long and deep from the murmuring Moreau. We're a tripod o' as free-hearted buccaneers as ever swatted a bufla, trailed a red-rind to death, or winged a Vulture. We also make a speciality o' doin' the 'way-up thing by ladies, and tenderfeet, and—"

"Then we've struck the right camp, for under the latter class we claim your hospitality," said Bradstreet, with a soft laugh.

Thus the conversation ran on for some time. The two men declined food, having already had their supper out of their own supplies. They discussed the topics incident to their surroundings, and finally, when all subjects of interest seemed about exhausted, Old Rattler turned to One-Armed Phil and said:

"Well, Phil, s'pose you go on with your story," and then to Bradstreet and Noel he continued: "He had just begun a camp-fire story when you folks came up—the story o' how he lost that arm."

"Tell it, by all means," said Jim Noel, "for I'm tired of talkin' and ready to listen."

"I think you'd better excuse me, gentlemen," said Phil, the color all seeming to fade from his face, while his friends noticed a peculiar and unnatural light in his eyes.

"No, we won't excuse you, Phil," said Stonewall.

"Go ahead, boss," said Bradstreet, leaning back against a tree and looking up into the darkness with a contented expression upon his face.

"By your desire I will," said One-Armed Phil, turning toward Bradstreet, as if complimented by that gentleman's request, at the same time adjusting his pistol-belt as if to relieve him of some undue pressure. "Many years ago," he again commenced, "when I was a boy of fourteen, I lived with my parents in a prairie home—no difference to any of you where it was located—and alongside of us lived a neighbor and his family. There were two children of us—myself and a baby sister of nearly three years. Of our neighbor's family there were three—the father and mother and one child, a daughter about my age. At the time we settled there we were exposed to some dangers from the Indians and so were kept in great suspense. But instead of Indians harming us we were visited one day by a band of outlaws or horse-thieves, who deliberately demanded our horses, of which father and our neighbor had six. In endeavoring to protect his property father was shot down dead, as was also our neighbor and his wife. When the villains came to the cabin to plunder it, mother and I endeavored to defend it with our lives, and mother did shoot one of the villains dead, but the next moment she, poor, brave woman, was killed, and I seized and dragged out into the yard and after some parleying a big villain raised his pistol and fired at me. I remember that well, and his blazing eye as it glanced along the murderous tube will never be effaced from my memory as long as I live. I fell within a few feet of our door and, of course, I remembered nothing more until hours afterward. It seems that the thieves and murderers fired both cabins after plundering them, and the smoke of the burning buildings attracted the attention of some cattle-men returning southward from the hills, where they had been in search of stolen stock. They rode down to the burning cabins, which were a mass of red ruins when they reached them. At the edge of the pile that marked the place of our home, they found me lying with my left hand burned to a crisp by the fire that had rolled outward, they said, when the cabin fell."

"Finding that I was not dead, the stockmen removed me to a little stream hard by, bathed my brow, dressed my wounded head where the outlaw's bullet had done its bungling work, and restored me to consciousness."

"But when I realized my condition—that my hand was burned off, that my parents, baby-sister and neighbors were all dead and burned to ashes—along with my untold suffering, I prayed for death to relieve me."

"Great Rosycrusians! it must 'a' been awful!" exclaimed Old Rattler.

"Dreadful! dreadful!" added Raney Bradstreet; "it is a miracle you survived the awful shock."

"I did, however," Phil went on, "but what I suffered no tongue can tell. The stockmen took me to the nearest settlement, which was thirty odd miles away, where, to save my life, I had to undergo the amputation of my arm. After I got so that I could travel, the stockmen sent me to my friends in the East. There I recovered, and I was sent to school that I might obtain such an education as would enable me to make a living with my single hand. But all the time I was restless. I could not forget my murdered friends—I could not efface from my memory that murderous eye blazing along that pistol. Something seemed to be crying out to me, day and night, to avenge the death of my friends. And this grew upon me until I was no longer

able to resist the power that was urging me on, and so I returned to the West, a Nemesis at heart. I landed in Deadwood, and while lying in wait there for my victims I engaged in mining, and now have a rich-paying claim there; and yet I care naught for gold. My heart cries out for revenge! revenge!

"I have been there nearly three years, and—"

"How many of the bloody devils have you swatted?" asked Old Rattler, becoming somewhat excited.

"Not one," Phil continued; "the fates have seemed against me all along. I may have met some of the murderers, but failed to recognize them, although I felt certain I would never forget the faces of some of the villains no difference when or where I should meet them. There was another face, however, that has ever been before my mental vision, and that was the face of Margery Ashton, our neighbor's daughter. She was a fair and comely girl who had won a warm place in my boyish heart, but I have never entertained any other thought than that she was murdered with the rest. A thousand times, as I have sat alone tracing out forms in the flying clouds or in the dancing flames of my camp-fire, the sweet, fair face of Margery always comes up before me; but never did it seem so plain as the day I stooped to drink from that mountain-spring—"

"Ay!" exclaimed Rattler, "then the vision you saw in that spring was the face of Margery Ashton?"

"Yes, Rattler," he answered.

"I saw the vision, too, Philip!" declared Rattler, "and, my boy, if that was Margery's vision then Margery is livin', for I am sure it was a reflection of a livin' bein'."

"I cannot think so, Rattler. If I could see her face in the clouds of Heaven, why not in the limpid pool?"

"But why should I see the same, Philip?"

"I do not know," he answered, with a nervous movement of his whole body. "I have brooded over the matter so often and so long that sometimes I think I am losing my reason, for my mind becomes confused and everything seems swimming before me. That is why I have refused to talk on the subject. But I have no doubt but Margery was killed with all the others but myself, and even me they left for dead."

"Then you really think you would recognize the outlaws if you should meet the murderous wretches?" observed Bradstreet.

"As I have said," replied Phil, "I would recognize some of them, if not all. The man who fired at me I would know among a million."

"They may all be gone from this country, or killed off before this," said Bradstreet, "for the life of an outlaw is a very uncertain one, I should say."

"If any of them are dead, they are doubtless undergoing the punishment that God has promised to all evil-doers," answered Phil; "but whenever, or wherever—if ever, I meet any of them on this earth I will avenge my wrongs. Wouldn't you, Mr. Bradstreet?"

"I certainly should," answered Bradstreet, shifting his position.

Scarcely were the words out of the man's lips ere One-Armed Phil sprang to his feet, whipped out his revolver and sent a bullet crashing through Raney Bradstreet's brain.

"There!" cried the avenger, with the ferocity of a madman, "vengeance is mine! I took him at his word, and he is my first victim of that murderous band!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHAINED FUGITIVES.

THE tragic death of Raney Bradstreet fairly paralyzed the senses of those who witnessed it, so sudden and unexpected was the blow of the avenger given, and for a moment they sat like men in a stupor of horror.

Old Rattler was the first to move and to speak.

"My God! Phil, what have you done?" he cried, springing to the side of Bradstreet, who had fallen over upon his face.

Before Phil could answer, and while Stonewall Bob was rising to his feet, the friend of the dead man, Jim Noel, sprang to his feet with the quickness of a panther, and, seizing a stout club as he did so, dealt the Boy Trojan a blow upon the head that sent him back to the earth, stunned and bleeding, and with almost the same motion the fearful bludgeon swung around, striking the hand of One-Armed Phil and knocking his revolver from his grasp out into the darkness.

"Ka-lee! ka-lee! ka-lee!" rung from Noel's lips, even as he plied the club, in the clear, shrill notes of a bird of the night.

All these transactions, from the time Stonewall was stricken down until Phil had been disarmed, occupied but the fraction of a minute, and as Noel's cry was instantly answered from the surrounding darkness by similar voices, Old Rattler sprang to his feet with the exclamation:

"Red Vultures! by the great Rosycrusians!—eh, so that's your lead, is it?"

The last words were addressed to Jim Noel who, with upraised club, sprang toward the borderer, but with the agility of a cat the old man

leaped aside and avoided the blow intended for him.

At the same instant half a score of men rushed from the darkness with a yell that too plainly told Rattler and his friend Phil that the Vultures were upon them, and that their only safety lay in flight. But this was not to be thought of by the brave plainsmen, for their young friend, Stonewall Bob, had not recovered sufficiently from Noel's blow to be able to rise to his feet, and they at once prepared to battle in his defense. The odds, however, were too great for them. One-Armed Phil now possessed no weapon but his single hand, but with this he dealt terrific blows before he was overpowered and borne to the earth. Rattler got in but a single, yet deadly shot before he was seized from behind and also borne down, disarmed and bound hand and foot.

Curses loud and deep fell from the lips of the Vultures as they gazed upon the lifeless form of Bradstreet and the victim of One-Armed Phil's revolver, and it required some effort on the part of Noel to prevent the villains from shooting Phil down in cold blood. It seemed that Bradstreet was a great favorite with the outlaws, and his death fired them with a spirit of frenzy, but in face of all their threats and menacing acts the one-armed avenger stood unmoved and defiant as if courting death.

"Quite a haul of roustabouts," one of the Vultures finally exclaimed, "but it has been rather expensive, giving the life of Bradstreet for three such plungers. Say, Noel, who is that big chap there, and what's the matter with him? He seems confused."

These questions referred to Stonewall Bob, who reclined upon one elbow on the earth, gazing around him in a listless, confused way, feeling about him on the ground with his free hand like a blind person. His face was covered with blood that trickled from the wound on his head. He seemed to notice no one nor heed the outlaws' threats or brutal jests.

"That's the biggest haul of the kit, Bramble," replied Noel; "it's the famous Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan, who won such notoriety last fall in cleaning out Black Bluford's band almost to a man."

"Indeed?" replied Bramble; "well, if Captain Vulture was only here now, I'm of the opinion he'd order a general hanging-bee. But what ails the Trojan? he gropes and glares around like he was slightly confused by our presence."

"I gave him a salter on his head that's set his brilliant brain in a whirl," replied Noel; "but as he's gradually getting around to his senses I guess we'd better halter him up and save trouble. Will some one bring an extra lariat?—be quick! the kid's trying to git up now."

A man hurried off after a rope, and while gone Stonewall Bob, with a great effort, rose to his feet and reached out his hands like a blind man feeling his way—muttered incoherently, and staggering backward would have fallen had Noel not sprung forward and grasped him by the arm.

"He's crazy as a blind bed-bug—kind o' groggy," said the outlaw, "and's a little weak in his pegs. Perhaps a bullet through his carcass would be the least trouble for us and the easiest trip for the Trojan outlaw-demolisher and—"

The outlaw's remarks were suddenly cut short by the Boy Trojan jerking away from him—turning as he did so, and driving his fist into the villain's face with such terrific violence as to lift him clear off his feet and land him prostrate on the earth twenty feet away, while, with a yell of defiance, the young giant bounded away into the darkness.

So quickly was this done that the Boy Trojan was out of sight before Noel's friends could comprehend the situation and act accordingly. A few random shots were quickly fired in the direction the youth had gone, and two of the Vultures started in pursuit of him, but they soon returned, cursing with impotent rage.

As to the facetious Jim Noel, he scrambled to his feet in a much worse condition than he had pronounced Stonewall Bob a few moments before. His nose was mashed flat upon his face, and a great gash cut on his cheek from which the blood was pouring in torrents. The fellow could not speak. He was compelled to hold his lips closed to keep the blood out of his mouth, and it was only with a great effort that he was enabled to breathe through his broken nose—at every breath the blood spurting out in hot jets.

"Gods, man!" exclaimed Bramble, "he's mashed your whole face—the big hound played it on you fine."

Noel blubbered out an oath, at the same time motioning for help.

His friends did all they could to stop the flow of blood and alleviate his pain. Water was brought and his face bathed, and when at length the bleeding had ceased, his agony became all the more intense. His face began to swell up and turn purple.

"By ruination, Jim," Bramble finally observed, "your face's beginnin' to look worse'n a ham of spoiled meat. You're a horror—a ghastly horror!"

Noel groaned out a curse.

Despite his perilous situation Old Rattler could

maintain his silence no longer, and ventured to remark:

"That boy-giant's a lily-lipped hummer, folks, sure as the devil 'll git you all. When he swats a feller with that fist he swats to smash—spoil—demolish."

"Silence, you old vagrant!" thundered Bramble, "or you'll be swinging to a limb first thing you know."

"Give me a pistol till I shoot him!" muttered Noel, his blazing eyes just visible between the two slits in his swelling face.

"Hullo!"

It was a strange voice that thus accosted the Vultures in the midst of their anger and excitement.

Looking in the direction whence it came the outlaws were somewhat startled by the sight of a man standing just within the radius of light. He was a most wretched specimen of humanity. He was rather tall and slender, though his age was uncertain. He was covered with rags and dirt, and but for the contour of his features no one could have told his color. He was hatless, and his scraggy hair hung in muddy "rat-tails" about his head. He had a thin short beard that was burdened with dirt and clay. He had a wild, hunted look about him, which was in a measure accounted for when the outlaws saw that his hands were fastened together with a pair of iron handcuffs.

"By the Wandering Jew!" exclaimed Bramble, "what on earth appears before us?—a man, or an escaped chimpanzee?"

"You tell for I can't," was the response of another astonished Vulture.

"Men, I'm a poor, miserable, hunted devil, chased almost to death," said the wretched-looking man, "and I've a pard, too, that's nighly gone. For days and nights we've been foltered and hounded from wood to water, ki-yote den to mud-hole, without rest or food. We see'd your light and crept up, and findin' you were Vultures made bold to seek rest by your fire. You've nothin' to fear from us."

"I should say not," replied Bramble; "but where's your pard?"

"Here, behind me," replied the wretch, and as he spoke his "pard" stepped into view. He was a short, stout, smooth-faced man, but fully as ragged and dirty as the other. His hands were free, yet around each wrist the outlaws saw an iron bracelet from which dangled a few links of a broken chain.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Bramble, "you're a pretty hard-looking pair of sports."

"And you'd be, too, pards, if ye'd been chained up three days and had to hunt yer holes as we've had to."

"Who put them darbies on you?"

"Them detectives did it."

"What detectives?"

"Didn't hear their name o' but one, and his name war Kit Bandy."

"The deuce you say!" retorted Bramble, manifesting no little surprise, which was also shared by his friends; "where did they nab you?"

"In ther hills northeast o' Deadwood."

"What'd you been doing?—robbing some one's till?—or hen-roost?"

"They 'cused us o' robbin' the Deadwood stage, they did."

"Well, did ye?" queried Bramble.

"Seein' as what you're a Red Vulture, I'm not afeard to say that you're no better'n we be," was the fugitive's evasive reply, with an attempt at a facetious smile.

"Well, that's a roundabout way of answering a straight question, but since you don't deny the robbery, I guess you're somewhat guilty. But I'd never take you fellows for road-agents."

"Reckon we don't look f'rocious, but if you'll give us somethin' to eat we'll show ye we're no dainty ki-yotes."

"Well, who are you anyhow?"

"I'm Bill Sherk—that's my Christian name, but in the hills ther blamed fools named me Musket-Mouth, and pard thar, he answers to ther beautiful name o' Slickchop Mose."

"Never heard of either one of you before," said Bramble; "I reckon you've not been in business long."

"Not in these diggin's," replied Musket-Mouth, "though we used to be quite numerous down 'bout Denver afore society got so dumbed stuck-up as to want us to wear neckties."

While this desultory conversation was going on, the two fugitives gradually worked themselves up to the camp-fire, though they seemed uneasy and restless, and started at every sound, as if it were the tread of a pursuer. Finally Musket-Mouth's restless eyes fell upon the dead bodies of the two outlaws and also upon the bound forms of Old Rattler and One-Armed Phil, when he observed:

"Got some stiffs, I see, and two 'plungers.' Been havin' a racket, have you?"

"Yes," answered Bramble; "but how did you escape from the officers? We want to know more about you."

"Slickchop, butted one o' them over a cliff when he wasn't lookin', and I kicked the other in the howels and he curled up like a bear and begun to vomit, and then we pulled out. But the sick feller soon got rid o' his cramp and give the 'larm to his friends that

war comin' behind, and we've had it ever since. Last night we hid in a hole in the rocks, and pard there sawed all night on the edge o' a sharp stone and wore his chain in two, but I had no rock to saw on, and ever sense then I've been busy trying to keep outen the 'plungers' way, as we call ther detectives."

The outlaws examined the irons on the fugitives' wrists, and Bramble even tried to pull Musket-Mouth's off over his hands, but made a signal failure except to cause the fugitive to roar and howl with pain.

"Old dandy, you're elected to carry your bracelets awhile longer, at least," said Bramble, "though they would come good just now if we could get them off to put on that pilgrim there."

"Well, never mind the irons now," said the gaunt, wild-eyed fugitive, "but if you've any stuffin'-fodder for us, mention it—bring it forth like a royal diadem."

"Hav'n't any here," said Bramble, "but we've plenty at our own camp 'bout two miles from here. It may be you can find some 'mong them 'plungers' outfit there."

"Plenty of it," broke in Old Rattler; "in my pack you'll find bread and butter, and roast hump o' buffalo, and briled venison, and baked fish, whisky-pickles, canned peaches, baked beans, punkin pie, coffee, cream, and anything and everything dainty and stout. Help yourselves, for I reckon we won't need it any more."

"No, indeed, you will not!" retorted an outlaw.

The two beggarly fugitives went through the borderman's effects like jackals, and brought to light some bread and meat, which they devoured like rapacious wolves. Old Musket-Mouth was compelled to carry both hands together whenever he took a bite, but he took advantage of this by keeping both hands full and taking a double bite, thereby keeping his mouth so full that his attempt at conversation was like the growl of a dog over a piece of tough meat.

The outlaws watched the hungry beggars gorge themselves, not a little amused at their performances, for all attempts to keep up a conversation with them was very unsatisfactory.

Finally the two road-agents finished their repast. Musket-Mouth arose and grunted with an air of satisfaction, then seating himself, he said:

"I feel better now that a long-felt want has been filled, and if that 'are critter thar"—referring to Old Rattler—"war that ganglin'-legged Old Kit Bandy, I'd show you Vultures how to cut up and carve a 'plunger.' I'm f'ercious when I've a full stomach, but tame and gentle as a suckin' dove when chained down and holler from skull to boots."

In the course of an hour or so two men were dispatched to bring up the Vultures' horses. They were afraid that Stonewall Bob might run them off, as they had already discovered that the indomitable youth had got away, unseen, with his own horse and those belonging to Rattler and One-Armed Phil.

When the men came back with the horses the animals were tied close by, under saddle and bridle, ready for instant use. The news that Musket-Mouth brought of the presence of Kit Bandy and a party of followers in the country was sufficient cause for them to be on the alert.

It was late in the night when the party laid down to rest, leaving a man on guard.

Musket-Mouth and Slickchop were given a blanket to share between them and the two fugitives laid down on the ground and drew the cover over them. Tired and worn the two fellows soon fell asleep, but much to the annoyance of his bed-fellow and the Vultures that were trying to sleep, Musket-Mouth talked in his slumber and occasionally started up striking out with his fettered hands at an imaginary foe.

The man on guard was not a little amused at the old fellow's ravings at first, but it finally became monotonous and so he concluded to rouse him out and make him sit up or seek other quarters. Walking across the now dimly-lighted area he gave the old man a vigorous kick, saying:

"Git up here, you old deal and get out of this or keep your mouth shut. You'll wake them dead men up a-snorin'."

"I'll git up," the old man said, and with the suppleness of youth he bounded to his feet, his shackles falling from his hands as he did so; then, with the quickness that the hawk drops from the air upon its prey, he drove his bony fist into the face of the unsuspecting outlaw, who fell to the earth, ten feet away.

A yell from the prostrated Vulture's lips awoke his companions from their slumber.

In an instant Slickchop was upon his feet, knife in hand, and at Rattler's side. In another moment the old borderman's bonds had been severed, and he was upon his feet, a free man! Almost simultaneously Stonewall Bob came lunging out of the darkness with a yell that would have put to shame a Comanche warrior. In each hand he clutched a revolver.

The Vultures, thus suddenly startled from their sleep, were for a moment confused, but the first thing they discovered was that they had been entrapped, and, without attempting to raise a hand or fire a shot, they endeavored to seek

safety by flight into the darkness of the woods. But of the ten only five escaped the deadly weapons of the Boy Trojan, Musket-Mouth and Slickchops.

The victors did not attempt to pursue the outlaws through the intricate darkness of the woods, but the moment victory was assured them, the fugitive Musket-Mouth turned, and grasping both of Old Rattler's hands, said, in a changed voice:

"Rattler, by the horn o' old Joshua! I'm expirin' glad to cross palms with you, you darlin' old scamp!"

"By the great Rosycrusians, and confusion o' Babel!" exclaimed Old Rattler, in wild astonishment, as he glanced into the eyes of Musket-Mouth, "I hope I may expire if it isn't that old buccaneer, Kit Bandy, king of frauds and prince o' mountaineers!"

CHAPTER V.

STORY OF KIT'S ADOPTED.

FOR several moments Kit Bandy and Old Rattler stood mute with surprise gazing into each other's eyes, their hands clasped and their faces radiant with joy. Bandy was the first to speak, and in reply to the old hunter's exclamation, he said:

"Yes, Rattler it are I, Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy, nomad and martyr—a fugitive from the perils o' domestic infelicity; but right down glad to meet you, Rat. Let me see; it has been two years since we parted at Laramie, and I don't see as age has added even a wrinkle or a gray hair to your beauty, you old bushranger."

"As for you, Kitsie," Rattler responded, "I can't say what time has done for you, for the dirt on your profile has so completely concealed you from view that there's nothin' recognizable 'bout you 'cept your Adonis-like figure; and then your classic voice—the belchin's of a musket-mouth, sure enough, war a mixture o' Choctaw and ki-yote; but, bless your deceptive old soul, I'm glad to meet ye 'for a' that, for a' that."

"This 'ere rooster, Rattler," said Kit, turning to the man Slickchops, "are a pard o' mine, and he rambles to the name o' Zeke Ruble. He's not much on mouth-work, but just turn a grizzly loose on him or a dozen Ingins, if ye want to see how a buzz-saw works up timber."

"I are very glad to meet you, Ruble," said Rattler, shaking hands with the mountaineer; "and now I'm goin' to introduce you to my chums. This 'ere gentleman are One-Armed Phil, and this bit o' humanity with a lump on his head are Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan."

"Glad to grasp your hand, Phil," said Bandy; "but as to Bob, Rattler, we met him awhile ago."

"When—where?"

"Before we came here—that is, a few minutes after he erected a Chinese pagoda on that outlaw's mug and then lunged into the wilderness of night. We had a long chat with him, and there and then arranged our disguises, put on our handcuffs, named each other with appropriate handles and sailed into camp, and the rest you know."

"Then you carry your disguises with you?" observed One-Armed Phil.

"Our clothing and handcuffs we carry," answered Bandy; "but as for this dirt on our faces we secured that down by the river and thar's plenty more thar yit."

"And these revolvers Bandy and Ruble loaned me," said Stonewall, displaying the weapons with which he had done such fearful execution among the Vultures.

"Oh, by the way, Bandy," remarked Rattler, "for the Lord's sake, when did you fellows have anything to eat last?"

"Bout an hour ago," responded Kit, with a bland smile; "I tell you, Rat, we war hungry, for we hadn't had a bite since mornin' and then only had a little, half-grown fawn baked on hot coals."

"Dainty fellers, you be," said Old Rattler; "you've lost your appetites, I know," and in the mornin' I'll make ye some hummin'-bird broth. But look here, I'm a little nervous, and if you'd step down to the river and soak yourselves and git the dirt off your mugs, you wouldn't frighten me so—but then, mebbey water'll hydraphobia you, Kit."

"It are no greater stranger to my face than your stomach, my festive old friend," retorted Kit. "I'll bet a coonskin you don't know how Dakota water tastes."

"Kitsie, I see you are the same old lilly-lipped hummer as of yore, the same meetin'-house o' piety, rooral district o' simplicity and State's prison full o' arbitrary propriety."

"I wish, Rattler," said Kit, "that you had some virtues I could extole, but you hav'n't, and never will have until some parson preaches your funeral."

After some further sparring between the old bordermen, Bandy and Ruble went down to the river and washed the dirt and mud from their hair, faces and hands, then they proceeded to where they had left their horses and outfit and removed them down to camp.

Meanwhile Stonewall Bob and Old Rattler searched the dead outlaws and took possession of their revolvers, knives and ammunition. Then they carried the bodies to one side and covered

them over with boughs. Had they possessed the tools with which to open the earth they would have buried them in compliance with their convictions of Christian duty.

Among the lifeless forms there was that of the desperate Jim Noel. His face was swollen and purple from the blow dealt him by the Boy Trojan. As Old Rattler threw a bough over him he said:

"Bradstreet and Noel, poor, miserable, lyin' devils, are both gone over the dark river. Their deception didn't work like the classic performance o' that luscious Musket-Mouth and his pard, Slickchops. But the death o' Bradstreet was a wild-eyed stunner—that reminds me—where's Phil?"

"He left several minutes since," answered Stonewall; "he said he'd run out and reconnoiter the situation."

"I've been so full o' business I hadn't missed him," said Rattler, "but isn't he a terror on the shoot? Didn't he play his story fine on that bearded outlaw? Ah! that man Phil is a strange critter, but true as steel and brave as a lion. I met him a month ago for the fu'st, and we naterally froze together, and when I told him o' my goin' on this trip he asked to accompany me, and, of course, I couldn't refuse, and I'm glad now I didn't, for he's a hull team if he has but one hand."

"He'll make it hot for the murderers of his friends," said Stonewall, "and I hope he may meet every one of them for they will not recognize their supposed boy-victim now grown to manhood, and this gives him an advantage of the murderous scoundrels."

Kit Bandy and his friend, Zeke Ruble, presented quite an improved appearance when they returned to camp. Rattler was now enabled to see that the lapse of time had made little if any change in the old mountain detective. He was just about the same in looks, in his jolly and rollicking spirit, physical powers and undaunted courage.

But no one would ever have taken Zeke Ruble, as he now appeared, for the slouchy, dirty-faced Slickchops, and it was only the presence of Bandy with him that convinced the others that such was the case, so great a change had the man made in himself. He was a man of perhaps forty-five years of age, of about medium height, and rather inclined to corpulency. His smoothly-shaven face possessed a frank, open look, although it bore several ugly scars that somewhat marred its symmetry. His forehead was broad and intellectual, and his mouth rather large yet expressive of firmness and decision. His eyes were of a dark-blue, and the only feature of his face not altogether in harmony with the others—not but what they were bright enough, but they had a quick, restless and furtive movement of one accustomed to being on his guard. No one noticed this quicker than did Old Rattler, but he naturally attributed it to a nervous temperament and force of habit from living in the midst of constant dangers.

Rattler complimented him upon his improved appearance and then, turning to Stonewall Bob, he waved his hand toward Old Kit and said:

"Look there, Robert Comstock, at Kris 'Lumbus Bandy, and tell me if you don't think he's an Ambrosial god! a star-eyed buccaneer?"

The Boy Trojan smiled in a perplexed way, for, being a stranger to Bandy, he could hardly enter into the full spirit of Old Rattler's humorous satire.

Bandy, however, at once came to the young plainsman's relief, saying:

"Stonewall, that old bushranger's compliments don't disturb me at all, even if they are fun-pokers. If he'd gone through all that I have, the enamel'd be off his bright, brassy face. If he'd weathered the storms o' ten years o' married life as I have, he'd know more'n he does. I confess that I'm but a relic of my former self, for I carry the mementoes of every year o' my connubial alliance somewhar about me. This Catskill range here down my cheek is where my wife, Sabina Bandy, fetched me one little love-swipe with a hatchet, and this Smoky Hollow gutter on my head here is whar she emphasized a wifely command with the poker. This sunflower here on my brow is not a birthmark, oh, no! it is whar my loving spouse kissed me by proxy with a sizzlin'-hot sad-iron. Do you wonder that I'm disfigured?—that I'm not so exquisitely beautiful as Mr. Rattler? Do you wonder that I'm a Ruins of Alhambra? a downfall o' the Roman Empire? a Deestruction of Herculeaneum? a magnificent monument, chipped and defaced by the ruthless hand of woman?"

Old Rattler roared with laughter, and the others could not suppress a smile.

"How like the Psalms o' David and the Lamentations o' the Martyrs that sounds," said Rattler, "but say, Kitsie, have you been married any time since I see'd you last?"

"One't," replied Kit, with comic gravity; "that is, me and Sabina met, and arter talkin' things over in a rational way we concluded to make up, quit bein' a pack o' fools, settle down, and live together again; and so I employed an architect and workmen and proceeded to erect one of the finest sod-houses in all the big rowdy West. I stocked it up with the finest furniture

that I could manufacture, and we went to work again like two kittens. Things swum along lovely and a few months later Sabina suggested that if in my ramblin's around I should run across a nice little orphan child without a home, to try and git it and we would adopt it as our own, and raise it up and we would come to love it as our own flesh and blood, and thus loving it, it would be a kind o' a link to bind us closer together. To this proposition I quickly consented for I knew exactly whar I could lay my finger on the 'link.'

"Wal, in a few days I went over to camp and made straight for the 'Foamin' Mug,' the lead-in' saloon in the place, whar a orphan, a sweet little dark-eyed, meek-faced girl was helpin' tend bar. Of course, 'Bina said nothin' as to whether the orphan should be a gal or a boy, and so I made up my mind to try and git little Azelia away from the contaminatin' influence of that bad place. The saloon-keeper was an old pot-bellied Dutchman that hadn't any more feelin' for an orphan or 'preciation o' the beautiful than Old Tom Rattler has for pure, unadulterated water. I talked with old sour-kraut about the child, and he said her pretty face drew him much custom, and he didn't want to let her go. But I coaxed and entreated, and finally agreed to give him so much money if he'd give her up. The money fetched him a-flukin', but before handin' it over I went and talked with little Azelia about changin' her home. The little thing said she'd like to be adopted into a good, Christian family, and I told her that war we, and then she talked with old mash-tub awhile, and came back and told me she would go home with me. So she packed up her goods, and I paid old Limburger—give him my note payable in one year with interest and other trimmin's—and started for the Bandy clearin's the happiest man on earth. If she'd been my own child I couldn't have felt prouder as I led her into the parlor whar Sabina war fryin' some corn biscuits and interduced her to her new ma. The little thing, herself, seemed all joy and happiness. She war just twenty years old, but I hope to smother with a falsehood in my mouth if she looked a day or an hour over—say fourteen or fifteen."

"You rascally old fraud!" exclaimed Rattler, with a chuckle.

"Silence, man!" commanded Kit, with a frown, "this is a serious matter to me, and you don't want to be flingin' in your insinuations to harrow up my feelin's."

"If I'd been Sabina I'd harrowed up your hair for ye," Rattler again put in.

"I thought I'd done a splendid thing," Kit went on, "in selectin' the desired link, but when I'd interduced her to her mother, and I see'd 'Bina's under lip begin to hump up in the middle, I knew to onc't that she wer'n't satisfied with my selection o' an orphan, and as soon as we war alone she told me she'd rather had a little boy-link o' five or six than a girl o' uncertain years. Thar's whar we differed, but then I didn't tell her so—I knew better. I hadn't forgot the time she sewed me up in a blanket and rolled me into the Yuba river, jist because I danced a few times and then drank a bumper—a modest little bumper—with Hagar Ann For-got."

Things ran along quietly for several days, but all the while I could see a little cloud gatherin' in the domestic sky—that the link that war to bind us closer together was actin' like a jockey-stick—crowdin' us funder apart."

"One day Sabina took me aside, and with a triumphant gleam in her eyes, axed me if I knew that my link—my little Azelia, was a widder of twenty-two, whose husband had been killed in a saloon racket in Cheyenne. I was horror-struck by the news, and almost broke down under it; but then and thar, I had to promise that I'd waltz the orphan back to the camp inside of the next three days."

"That same day I managed to get a private talk with the child, and I told her Mrs. Bandy wanted her to go away jist because I thought so much of her, and that if she had to go, I'd go, too. I then axed her if she wouldn't go away—'way off with me where I could be a father to her, and not be tormented to death by a jealous mother. She said she would, and my heart was exceedingly happy. Then we made arrangements to go that night. We were to start at midnight. I had to go over to the camp, and was not to be home till in the night, and I was to meet Azelia with two horses all rigged at a certain pine tree. The night was dark—most darned dark, but at the appointed time I was at the appointed place, and by and by my little orphan came tripping down to me all bundled up in her jaunty little hat, veil and coat, with gloves on her hands. I greeted her in a whisper, and she answered me in the same way. Tenderly I lifted her into the saddle, nimbly I mounted my own boss, and then away we went down the dark valley into the darker canyon. I'd taken the precaution to muffle the horses' feet so their hoofs made no sound."

"Occasionally I leaned over and tenderly whispered to my timid, silent child, and softly she would whisper me 'yes, sir,' or 'no, sir.'"

"Oh, how exceedin'ly happy war I! The moon shone down into the canyon at times, and as we glided along it seemed to me that

I war floatin' in a gondola on a sea o' moonshine. The rip and rustle o' the night-birds' wings seemed like sounds emitted from harp-strings swept by the fairy fingers o' the night-wind. Every sound, in fact, seemed to resolve itself into music in symphony with my tuneful heart. The stars actually seemed to scrouge over before me in the sky, as if each one was scrambling to be the guide that war to lead me and my child to the happy land o' Canaan, while the man in the moon seemed laughing with joy and winkin' coyly with his bias eye."

"Of all fools, they say an old fool is the wu'st," observed Rattler, sententiously.

"Well," Bandy went on, without appearing to notice the interruption, "the purple shadows of night began to thin up after hours and hours of riding in heart-throbbing silence. Mornin' was comin', and I war really glad, for I wanted to look upon little Azelia's fair, sweet face. I watched the eastern sky growin' red and redder, and daylight was just about upon us when I was startled by a click very much like that of a pistol. The sound was at my side, and lookin' around, what was my speechless horror to behold my child with a derringer leveled upon my heart!"

"Azelia! my child! I cried, 'what does that mean?"

"Stop!" she fairly shrieked, and we quickly drew rein. Then she lifted her veil, or rather snatched it away with a snarl, and if there, instead o' my little Azelia, didn't set Old Sabina Bandy, I hope to smother for want of breath! Yes, there she sot, Rattler, with Azelia's jaunty little hat, and coat and veil and gloves all on nice as you please. The demon o' fury was blazin' in her eyes, and if looks 'd 'a' done it she'd 'a' shivered me to dust then and thar. I was terribly taken back—I felt sickish, and I lunged for an avalanche to come down the mountain-side and bury me sixteen million feet under it. But instead of an avalanche, Sabina's voice ag'in rung forth.

"Kit Bandy!" she fairly screamed, "climb down off o' that hoss at once or you'll fall off dead!"

"Boys, I got, for I knew Sabina could handle a pistol as gracefully as I can handle Old Tom Rattler, and when I was off the hoss she rattled on:

"Kit Bandy, I have a notion to *end* your career anyhow, yoff base, ungrateful wretch. But I reckon you'll not undertake to elope with another widdler—orphan child—soon ag'in. Thank the great and adorable mercy! Azelia Boggs had honor enough to give you away to me and help me in thwartin' your heartless designs, you prince o' old fools, as the widdler called you! Now go or come as you please, and go or come the best you can!"

"And with these remarks she took both horses, turned and departed homeward. Confound her old picters! she had ridden all o' thirty miles jist to git to play that miserable little trick on me.

"Wal, I was left standin' right there feelin' a little muttonish, and after while I sot down by the wayside under a pine, and begun to cogitate. I now diskivered why it was that the man in the moon had laughed so broadly and had winked so coyly with his bevel eye, and while I was ponderin' over the sudden changes in life—how I was dumped out o' my visionary gondola o' bliss onto a barren island o' humiliation, the stage from Deadwood came tearin' down the road like mad. I riz to my feet and sprung out before it to hail the conductor for a ride. The express messenger in the seat alongside the driver took me for a road-agent, and let fly with his revolver. The motion o' the stage probably saved my life, for his bullet just grazed the tip of my ear—a close call for Kit Bandy."

"Humph!" ejaculated Old Rattler, "the tip o' a jackass's ear is a long ways from any vital spot. It wasn't no close call at all, you infamous old buccaneer!"

Unable to hold in longer, Stonewall Bob and Zeke Ruble burst out into a roar of hearty laughter, but scarcely had the sound of their mirth died away ere the spiteful crack of a rifle came crashing through the night.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HUNTED CRIMINAL.

IN an instant every man was upon his feet, his rifle or revolver in hand, for he felt satisfied that the shot that had startled them had been fired by One-Armed Phil, who was, perhaps, in peril.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, dubiously, "that report tears through the night as though it war a death-knell."

"I'm afeard One-Armed Phil has run into an ambushed outlaw," said Old Rattler.

"If there's any more fighting to be done to-night I propose to have my share of it," declared Stonewall Bob, and he turned and glided away in the direction whence the report had come. He had gone but a short ways, however, when he met One-Armed Phil returning to camp.

"What's up, Phil?" he asked.

"Nothing now, but a skulking red-skin is down," was Phil's facetious reply.

"A red-skin! do you mean to tell me that

we've got to have a round with them varmints, too?"

"I cannot tell you, as to that, Bob, but there must be others around and in league with the outlaws. If you'll return and report to our friends that they may prepare for the worst, I will continue on the watch down hereaways."

"All right, Phil," replied Stonewall, and he hurried back to camp and delivered his message.

"By Rosycrusians! Ingins!" exclaimed Old Rattler, rubbing his hands together excitedly; "are it possible we're to have some red-rind fightin'?"

"Don't git skeered, Rat," said Bandy.

"Skeered, Kitsie! Ingins-fightin's my holts. I war raised on it for recreation from the time I could hoe beans till I war a man grown. Bring on your red-rinds if ye want to see me let loose like a thundergust at a picnic, or a cyclone in a hay-field."

"I've did a little Ingins-fightin', too," said Bandy, "and I reckon we can be found here till mornin' if they have any desire to interview us."

"I was not aware that the Indians were on the war-path," observed Zeke Ruble.

"As a tribe they're not," replied Bandy, "but then these hills are full o' outlaw Ingins o' the different tribes just the same as there are outlaw white men; and you generally find the red and white plunderers and murderers pullin' together. In fact, I've never undertaken to run down an outlaw in these mountains but what there's more or less Ingins blood to be spilt. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to be met on this trip by not only the white outlaws, but a hundred red ones."

"By the way, Bandy," said Stonewall Bob, "what kind of a trip are we going on, and where to? When Rattler sent me an invitation to meet you here and accompany the party he promised me fun, excitement and adventure. The bill in this respect has already been pretty well filled, but the particulars of the trip I really haven't heard more than it was to be a search for a criminal of some kind."

"That's it exactly," replied Old Kit, "our objective point is the very spot, valley, canyon or cavern where we can clap our hands on John Rossgrove, an escaped criminal who's under sentence of death for murder and for whom there's a handsome little reward offered. The reward is what makes the thing interestin' for the detectives. The State in which the killin' occurred offers one thousand, and then a man—the one who employed me—named Israel Danbaugh, offers ten thousand more."

"Whew! quite a pot!" declared Stonewall Bob.

"Yes, but I don't kear a cent for the money myself, more'n to pay expenses, but it's the fun and glory I'm arter. You see the murder was done thirteen years ago, and ever since that time the most famous city detectives have been tryin' to catch the criminal, and for me, an old mountain plunger, to beat them fine-haired fellows, would do me more good than to hear my esteemed friend, Rattler, there, tell two successive truths."

"What object can that man Danbaugh have in offerin' such a big private reward?" questioned Bob.

"I don't know, and as I told my pard, Ruble, I didn't care so that I caught the murderer. In fact, it wasn't any o' my business to ask him; but then I had my opinion, and that war that with Rossgrove dead Danbaugh would profit by it in some way. He told me right out that he wasn't a relative of the murdered man, and I knew then it was business with Mr. Danbaugh."

"But what makes you think Rossgrove is in these hills?"

"Well, I'll tell you: Rossgrove, they say, is a shrewd, sharp fellow, and ever since his escape the booger has been deliberately writin' letters back to the sheriff of the county where the deed was done, in every one protestin' his innocence of the murder of Henry Endicott, I believe his name was. Of course the writer gave no address, but the post-mark showed they were mailed fu'st one place and then another. Once one came from Cuba, then one from Montreal, then from the Sandwich Islands, New Orleans, City of Mexico, St. Paul, Walla-Walla, and the last two from Deadwood. Of course every time a letter was received it war given the detectives, and in this way it kept the fellers skip-pin' round all over God's creation. But when two letters in succession had been received from Deadwood, Danbaugh made up his mind his man was there or thereabouts, and he came on in person, leavin' the city detectives at home, concludin' to trust his case to men of the West. Well, he struck me at Cheyenne and told his story and wanted me to work up the case, and I agreed to try it on. We come on to Deadwood, and thar I spent two months lookin' out for my man, but he wer'n't among the miners, nor gamblers, nor thugs, so I concluded he must be among the outlaws. The fu'st clew I struck was some weeks ago. An outlaw belongin' to Captain Vulture's band was nabbed and taken in charge by the Vigilantes. Before he was hung I had an interview with him, and I wormed out of him the information that there was a man answerin' the discription o' Rossgrove to a dot belongin' to the band. He said the man was known

as The Minister, but what his true name was he didn't know. He also said The Minister never went out with the band, but was the real head and brains of the gang. The poor devil told me this, thinkin' perhaps he might save his neck by givin' his friends away, but he had to hang. This now is all I know about it, and as soon as I heard this much I set about organizing a picnic-party to hunt the criminal down if he's in these hills or yonder mountain. I fu'st saw Rattler and Ruble, and they were in for the hunt, and then Rattler suggested that we have you, Bob, in the party, and glad am I that you are. Now, boys, if we can clap the darbies onto Rossgrove and waft him back to where he's wanted, alive, you fellers can take the reward and I'll take mine in glory over downin' them city man-hunters."

"What's the description of Rossgrove?" asked Zeke Ruble.

"Medium hight, slender as a garter-snake, long brown beard when he left home, blue eyes, fair complexion, a small scar over his right eyebrow—prepossessin' and intelligent in general appearance. This was his description twelve or thirteen years ago, and of course he's that much older now and may be changed considerably."

"Rather a good description for a man guilty of murder," said Bob.

"Rather," added Ruble.

"Well, indeed," said Stonewall, "it is not so aggravated a case as One-Armed Phil's."

"Well, what about his case?" asked Old Kit; "you see he's a stranger to me, and you haven't told me the particulars of the tragedy enacted here by him."

Old Rattler narrated the story of the death of Phil's family and neighbors at the hands of a band of outlaws, as told by Phil himself a few hours before, including the story of the killing of the man Bradstreet."

"Then he really thinks some o' his folks might 'a' escaped after all?" observed Bandy.

"No he doesn't, and yet he's haunted with some kind o' a presentiment that he can't explain. It makes him silent and thoughtful at times, and then he'll fire up with a revengeful spirit, and again finally subside into a pleasant and jolly companion. He are brave as they make them, and I find he is no slouch in the knowledge of prairie-craft."

"I believe that I'll go out and help him in his watching," Zeke Ruble suddenly remarked, and taking up his rifle the hunter at once departed.

"Thar, Kitsie Ban," said Old Rattler, nodding his head in the direction Ruble had gone, "is an enigma to me."

"Who? Zeke Ruble?" exclaimed Kit.

"Yes; his eyes are a study for an eye-ologist—they're so quick and furtive, and when I war tellin' the story of One-Armed Phil's vengeance he betrayed emotions that war not entirely all surprise."

"I noticed that myself," said Stonewall, "but it must be a kind of a nervous habit, for he acted jist the same when Kit was telling about Rossgrove."

"I think a great deal o' Zeke," said Bandy, "and at Deadwood he stands high as a man, hunter and scout. He's been right in with me ever since I undertook to run Rossgrove down, and if he'd turn his attention to it he'd make a rattlin' detective."

"Oh, well," exclaimed Old Rattler, "this world are made up with queer people. For instance, there's you, Bandy, I defy the tribes o' earth to duplicate."

"Thar's whar we differ, Rat, for I can find haydoogin's o' counterparts o' yourself over amongst the Digger Ingins."

"Poor old Bandy!" sighed Rattler, "the she-bears are liable to come for you any time—Hullo! here comes One-Armed Phil. What's up now, Philip?"

"There's something going wrong, men!" the bearded avenger replied, betraying some excitement. "A canvas-covered wagon drawn by four horses is moving northward across the valley escorted by no less than thirty or forty mounted Vultures and Indians."

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, "that is a little suspicious. How far are they away, Phil?"

"All of two miles when they passed near where I was concealed. I heard the noise of the wheels, and unable at first to make out the cause of it, I advanced in the direction from whence it came, and made the discovery I have reported."

"Didn't see what war in the wagon, did you?" asked Rattler.

"No; the canvas cover was fastened down at the sides and ends, and two Vultures were mounted upon the near horses. I am satisfied, however, that that wagon contains something that should not be there."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about the wagon or team different from the general run of emigrant-wagons?" asked Stonewall Bob, betraying no little excitement.

"Nothing," replied Phil, "except that there was a big red star painted on the canvas and under it was the word 'Empire.'"

"Great Heaven! are you sure of this, Phil?" cried Stonewall, starting to his feet.

"I saw it plain enough, Bob," replied Phil.

"Then it was one of the wagons belonging to

Mr. Mahlon Graves's train!" the Boy Trojan declared; "they had such devices painted on them."

"You mean the party that had the gal, Ruth, whom you rescued from the flood?" said Rattler.

"The same, Rattler," Stonewall answered, "and I am afraid they have got into trouble after all. In fact, there seems to be no doubt of it now, else that wagon would not be here, and, friends, I must know what is in that wagon. I am afraid that Ruth—but, heavens! that cannot be!"

"Now, boy, don't be rash," admonished Old Kit Bandy; "you act for all the world as though you'd a gal in your mind, if not in your heart."

"He to whom the wagon belongs, Kit, had a fair and lovely girl with him. Who knows but she may be in that wagon in the power of those demons? I shall not sleep till I know."

The young plainsman examined his revolvers, and then, as he was about to take his departure, Rattler said to him:

"Look out that you don't collide with Zeke Ruble in the dark, and report to us if you need help."

"All right, Rattler," replied the young giant as he disappeared in the darkness.

After a few moments' conversation with Kit and Rattler, One-Armed Phil again left the camp. He could not be still. The spirit of revenge, that he had so long nursed in his breast, seemed to burn with greater intensity since he had slain the villain, Rancey Bradstreet.

In the course of half an hour Zeke Ruble came in. He had been off up the river, but found no trace of an enemy in that direction.

Bandy informed him of the discovery made by One-Armed Phil and of the departure of Stonewall Bob to investigate the same, and as they now awaited the return of the young scout, Ruble said:

"Bandy, you and Rattler lay down and take a nap. Phil and I will keep watch until morning, or until Stonewall returns. You old coons, I should think, needed rest and sleep."

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Kit; "Zeke, we're tougher'n bilt owls, but since there's no need o' us all sittin' up, s'pose we try a little snooze, Rattler?"

"Seen' you're not to stand guard, I'll risk it," said Rattler, and so the two bordermen wrapped themselves in their blankets and laid down.

Bandy soon fell asleep, as his heavy respirations indicated, but Old Rattler was not so fortunate. The excitement of the night seemed to have banished the goddess from him. However, he lay quiet, and in the course of an hour, when Ruble threw a pine stick on the bed of red coals and a blaze flared up and relieved the camp of its gloom, he was about to get up, but a movement on the part of Ruble caused him to change his mind. He saw the hunter glance around him, then advance to where the dead outlaws lay, and removing the boughs from the bodies, bend over and search each face closely as if he was searching for one that he knew. In this movement of the guard there was something that Rattler could not fully understand, and when at length he saw Ruble manifest a decided surprise, and begin searching the ground beyond the bodies as if for a trail, he arose to a sitting posture, and rubbing his eyes as if he had been asleep, he yawned out:

"How is it, Ruble? 'Most mornin'?"

Ruble started, and advancing toward him stooped over and said in a low tone:

"It can't be long: but, Rattler, one of them dead outlaws has disappeared as sure as I live."

"Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler, springing to his feet, "ye don't tell me!"

"During the darkness that prevailed after you and Kit laid down," Ruble said, "I thought I heard a creeping noise in the bushes, and when it ceased and I made sure it wasn't an enemy crawling toward us, I threw a stick on the fire and made a light and by it made the discovery of the body being gone."

"What's wrong now, boys?" asked Old Kit, starting up out of his slumber, and seeing the two men together knew by their very looks and attitude that something was wrong.

"One o' our dead outlaws has crawled off," answered Old Rattler.

Bandy threw aside his blanket, and rising to his feet advanced with Rattler and examined the faces of the dead outlaws.

"By Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler, "the one that's gone is that scamp, Jim Noel, under whose eye Stonewall Bob erected a cathedral."

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, "I'll bet the scoundrel was feignin' death all the time!"

"If so, he's played it on us in a way that beats Musket-Mouth and Slickchops all up."

"And has doubtless overheard every word that we said," Ruble added, "in relation to our future movements."

"And furthermore," exclaimed Bandy, "if he should git to his friends that have that tilted wagon, and report Stonewall Bob on their trail, they might make it hot for the Boy Trojan."

"It's a bunglin' piece o' work," said Rattler, "but suppose we take a look for the fellow; he may be wounded and just crawled off and concealed himself hereabouts."

"I will leave that for you and Ruble," said

Kit, "but I am goin' to shin out down the river, and if I can find Stonewall, put him on his guard, for fear the outlaw has escaped us and got to his friends. And now you men mustn't forget that those villains that did escape might be lurkin' around and seen' you two alone undertake to paralyze you."

"I think we'd better extinguish our fire," said Ruble.

"A good idea, but look out that you don't fire into friends returnin' to camp," cautioned Bandy.

"All right, Kitsie," replied Old Rattler; "I don't think I can be caught ag'in to-night by a gang o' them infernals; and as for you, Kit, be keeful, old pard. You know that if you git killed there'll be a cog outen the universe and the old thing'll go bumpin' around until its jarred into chaos."

But Kit heard not this caution, for the old detective had glided away into the darkness.

Ruble and Rattler, instead of putting out the fire, retired into the shadows, and, revolvers in hand, seated themselves to await further developments, the return of their friends and the coming of day.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT WAS IN THE WAGON.

STONEWALL BOB, after leaving camp, moved directly down the river with the avowed purpose of following its course until he struck the trail where the Vultures had crossed the Moreau or found their camp. He was satisfied that they intended crossing the river, for they must do so to reach the fastnesses of the nearest hills, yet he did not think that they would undertake to cross with the wagon that night, and therefore had hopes of finding them in camp on the banks of the stream.

He soon emerged from the grove into an open valley. This opening he crossed and finally came to where the plain was covered with a dense growth of willows, wild-plum bushes and cottonwood shrubbery.

By this time the moon, which did not rise until nearly morning, was up. Objects could be seen quite a distance, so the young plainsman was compelled to move with extreme caution and keep under cover of the thicket as much as possible. He knew not but that Bramble and his four friends might be lurking by the way.

Finally he struck a deer-path following close along the river, yet well in the shadow of the bushes. Into this he turned and followed along, his revolver clutched in his ready hand. Large as he was, the movements of the tiger through his native jungle were not more stealthy.

In this way he had stolen along for nearly a mile, when there suddenly rose up before him in bold outlines a conical-shaped hill. During the previous day Stonewall had noticed this on account of its peculiar formation. It was there alone, and was a landmark known among the hunters as "The Hermit Dome" and "The Hermit Butte." Viewed from the south it resembled a dome, but viewed from the north where the river had washed away the base until that side was high and almost perpendicular, it had more the appearance of a butte. The land side of this eminence was covered with a dense growth of pine bushes not over three or four feet high, but there was a little spot on its very summit entirely devoid of vegetation.

The very moment Stonewall swept his eyes across this Hermit Dome he discovered an object on its top that he knew did not belong there and which a second glance told him was a canvas-covered wagon! Of this he had no doubt, for it was distinctly outlined against the eastern sky, now bright almost as day with the rising moon.

This discovery satisfied him that the outlaws and Indians had halted there for the night. And there was not a doubt in his mind but that the wagon contained something of value to them, else they would never have gone to the trouble of climbing the hill with the vehicle. It was plain enough that the position was a good one for a night defense, for the Dome being situated in a sharp bend of the river, was flanked half-way around by perpendicular banks and also by the stream itself. There was another thing the thoughtful young plainsman took into consideration, and that was that the outlaws must have had some knowledge of the immediate presence of pursuers or dangers, else they would never have taken the pains they did to secure the wagon and its contents against invasion. He could see no signs of life about the vehicle, yet he was satisfied it was there, and the next question with him was as to how he was to accomplish the object of his mission in finding out what the wagon contained.

As he could settle upon no definite plan until he had ascertained the strength and disposition of the enemy, he moved on toward the Dome. He had almost reached its base when he caught the sound of voices that seemed to come from the thicket before him and to his right.

Stepping from the deer-path into the denser shadows of the bushes, he listened. He could hear a Babel of voices, Indians and white men, in conversation. He could also hear horses cropping the bushes and tramping about, and presently he scented the odor of burning tobacco. This discovery was a disap-

pointment to the youth. He was satisfied now that a line of sentinels, reaching, no doubt, from the river below the Dome to the river above, guarded the approaches on the land side, and that he was just about as close to the wagon as he was likely to get that night.

For once in his eventful life Stonewall Bob was at his wits' ends, and while trying to study out some course to pursue without having to deliberately beat a retreat, his keen ear caught a slight sound near him. It was very faint and appeared to be in the path from which he had just stepped aside. It was a sound made by something crawling, but whether human or beast the young scout could not determine.

For fear, however, that his presence in the vicinity had been detected, and that the sound was made by an Indian in search of him, he remained motionless and silent until the sound could no longer be heard. But scarcely was his mind free of one fear before he was startled by another—the sound of heavy footsteps coming along the deer-path from up the river.

A few moments later he saw a man whose head and shoulders rose above the bushes in the moonlight pass near him.

The fellow was hatless, and his face—a hideous-looking object—was covered with blood.

Stonewall would have sworn the man was the outlaw, Jim Noel, from whom he had received and to whom he had given blows that night, had he not seen that villain's body dragged aside lifeless and laid alongside his slain comrades.

But whoever the fellow was, Bob saw that he advanced with the boldness of one who seemed to have the assurance of friendship in the outlaws and Indians near, and he listened for the result of the fellow's approach to them. A few moments later he heard the sentinel call out:

"Who comes there?"

And then to his surprise and consternation, he heard the answer:

"Me, Jim Noel!"

Still Bob would not have believed the man had his eyes not borne stronger evidence of the startling fact. But how the villain had ever got away alive, even if he had been feigning death, was a question that vexed the young scout's mind, and created in his breast a fear for the safety of his friends at camp.

The arrival of Noel among his associates created a ripple of surprise; but the discovery of his condition produced an outburst of wild excitement.

Instantly an idea flashed through the mind of Stonewall Bob, and that was to take advantage of the outlaws' excitement and endeavor to pass the sentinel; and it was no sooner conceived than he proceeded to carry it into execution. Stepping back into the deer-path he crept forward on hands and knees.

He passed within twenty feet of the excited mob that would have torn him to pieces in a minute had he been discovered.

But even before he was aware of it the adventuresome young scout had passed the guard—that individual, as he had anticipated, being so deeply absorbed in the tale of horror that the battered Jim Noel was entertaining his friends with that he, for the time being, forgot his duty.

Stonewall gained a point in the thicket a few rods up the steep side of the dome from whence he could get a partial view of the enemy's camp below. He was surprised at the large number he saw, but he was not discouraged. In fact, he was rather encouraged, for he realized that their great excitement and fury would blind them to the real situation and throw them off their guard.

He could hear Jim Noel's voice from his hiding-place, but with the exception of a word, now and then, he could not understand what he said, for Jim's mouth and facial muscles were not in a condition for distinct articulation.

When the villain had finished his story, curses loud and deep were uttered by the outlaws. Especial blessings of this kind were called down upon the head of Kit Bandy, the voluble Musket-Mouth, and Stonewall Bob, the boy-with-the-battering-rams. Never did a man understand more thoroughly what his enemies thought of him than did the Boy Trojan, and yet the anathemas heaped upon his head were mild in comparison to those devoted to Kit.

While listening to the villains Bob saw five more men come from up the river and join them, and no sooner had one of them spoken than he recognized the voice as that of the villain Bramble, who had figured so conspicuously at our friends' camp that night.

The arrival of this five and the story they had to communicate created another wild excitement, which terminated in a decision to go almost en masse and raid Kit Bandy's camp, as they termed our friends' rendezvous.

But while they were busy making preparations to go, Stonewall left his hiding-place and began to ascend the hill, creeping on all-fours through the bushes. He had no fear for his friends' safety now that he knew they were alive, although he had been unable to ascertain how Jim Noel had ever turned up there alive.

The young scout crept along rapidly. He was half-way up the side of the Dome, when he was suddenly brought to a halt by placing his hand upon something warm and wet upon the ground.

He held his hand up so that he could see it in the moonlight, and to his surprise and horror saw that there was blood upon it.

Dropping back into the darkness, he peered out before him for the source of the blood. He saw the outlines of a dark object lying upon the earth. He drew his revolver, and reaching forward touched it. The contact gave no sound. The object was soft, yielding and motionless. The boy scout touched it with his hand and found it was a human body. But life was extinct, although the body was still so warm that the blood had not ceased to flow from a wound in the breast—evidence that the fellow had been quite recently slain.

Further examination revealed the fact that the man was an outlaw—a Red Vulture, but who had slain him? This was the question that now presented itself to the Boy Trojan's mind, and without its solution he left the body and passed on up the steep hillside.

Finally the determined youth reached the edge of the bald spot on the very summit of the Dome in the center of which, silent as the grave, stood the covered wagon which he readily recognized, by the device painted upon the canvas, as one of those belonging to Mahlon Graves's train.

The boy listened intently, but not a sound could he hear in or around the wagon, and he had begun to think that he had had all his trouble for his pains when he espied a motionless form stretched on the ground at the edge of the barren on his right. He crept softly toward it, still keeping under cover, and soon discovered it was an Indian, but what was the most startling to him was to discover the savage was dead.

What this second death meant was a most perplexing mystery to the Boy Trojan. The Indian had undoubtedly been left there to guard the wagon which now seemed deserted on the outside, but what might be under that canvas cover the youth shuddered to think.

For fear a guard might be concealed in the bushes, or perchance in the wagon, Stonewall made a circuit of the barren and found nothing in the shadows, but discovered that the wagon-tilt was closed all around.

Stopping where the shadow of the wagon reached out to the edge of the thicket, Stonewall stepped from the bushes into the opening and advanced along the line of darkness toward the wagon, which he reached unchallenged. In breathless suspense he placed his ear against the canvas and listened. He heard subdued voices inside—voices that undoubtedly belonged to females, but they were so low that he was unable to settle in his mind, one way or another, the dread fear that had seized upon him the minute that One-Armed Phil had reported the "Star of Empire" wagon in the possession of the allied foes.

After listening a few moments longer the youth tapped gently upon the canvas with the end of his finger.

Instantly all became silent within the wagon, then the long, murderous blade of a knife was thrust through the tilt from the inside—swept upward with lightning quickness cutting a long slit in the cover from the wagon-box to the ridge-pole.

Through the opening thus made there was instantly thrust from within a hand clutching a cocked revolver, whose murderous appearance was accompanied with the command:

"Silence or death!"

CHAPTER VIII.

STONEWALL'S WORST FEARS REALIZED.

QUICK as the lightning's flash the left hand of Stonewall Bob flew up seizing that of the unknown and knocking up the muzzle of the revolver, while he thrust his right hand into the shadows of the wagon, and seizing the fellow by the throat dragged him half through the opening in the canvas.

And then it was that the Boy Trojan was almost struck dumb with surprise and chagrin, for, as the moonbeams fell upon the face of the supposed outlaw-guard, it revealed the quaint and serio-comic visage of Old Kit Bandy!

"Hold, Bob—bee—ee!" Old Kit Bandy managed to whistle out through his contracted wind-pipe, his tongue almost protruding from his mouth, so vise-like was the grip of the Boy Trojan upon his throat.

Instantly the young scout released his hold, saying as he did so with no little earnestness:

"You old villain! I'd ought to choke you insensible!"

The old detective saw by the look on the boy's face, and by the tone of his voice that he had carried his love for a practical joke, even in the very presence of danger, a little too far with Bob whose mind was not in a condition for fun at that time; and after rubbing his throat and working his jaws to get his vocal organs in order again, he said in an apologetic tone:

"Stonewall, I've been waitin' for you here half an hour. How did you get through the lines?"

"By following your trail strewn with dead outlaws and Indians, you bloody old pirate," responded Bob, with a grim smile; "but, Kit, what or who is in this wagon?"

"They can speak for themselves," said Bandy, leaping to the ground with the nimbleness of youth.

The next moment the face and form of a fair and beautiful girl appeared in the opening in the canvas, and at a glance Stonewall saw that his worst fears were realized—that Ruth Graves was a prisoner in the wagon—that the fair girl whom he had rescued less than a fortnight before from the raging flood—she who had decorated him with a badge of honor, was a helpless captive in the power of the Red Vultures and the outlaw savages!

"My God! Ruth—Miss Graves!" the young plainsman cried, "I was afraid of this!"

"Oh, Stonewall!" cried the girl, in an excited whisper, reaching her hands out toward the young Trojan, as if in him she placed her hopes of deliverance, "I never supposed we would meet thus! Oh, the terrors that I have suffered since those evil wretches attacked our camp and carried me away!"

"And your father—where is he?"

"I do not know—I do not know whether he is dead or alive," the maiden responded. "Oh, this will drive me mad!"

"Cheer up, Miss Graves," said the brave young plainsman. "I have seen you in peril before and know you have courage, and with the help of Heaven we will cheat them villains out of the prey they think is so secure here."

"I know you are strong and brave, Bob," the maiden replied, a faint glimmer of hope flitting over her distressed and grief-stricken face, "but there are so many of the outlaws and Indians."

"Oh, my! isn't he a big fellow, though?" another person was suddenly heard to say, in a girlish voice, from the shadows of the tilted wagon.

A confused smile played for a moment around Ruth's lips, and then she broke the momentary silence that followed the speech of the other by saying:

"You see I am not alone in my captivity here, Stonewall. At the time I was taken this brave little girl was taken also," and as she concluded she drew the subject of her remarks into the opening where Bob could see her.

"I've heard of you, Stonewall Bob," the maiden said, without the least embarrassment or apparent depression of spirit over her situation.

"Well, indeed! who are you anyhow?" asked Stonewall, completely surprised by the presence of the girl, whose face was one of bewitching beauty.

"My name's Gypsy, and I live in the mountains," was the unsatisfactory response of the child, for such she really was in appearance.

"That's rather an indefinite answer," said Bob, feasting his gaze upon her big, sparkling eyes.

"That's all I could get outen the little rascal," said Old Kit, "and if she wants me for a beau she'd better tell me who she is."

"Oh, you horrid, ugly old man!" the girl replied, in a petulant tone, though a roguish smile that threatened to burst into a peal of laughter dimpled her brown cheeks.

"Friends," suddenly declared Stonewall, "we're wasting precious time, and the sooner we get away from here the better. Most of the outlaws and their red allies have gone off up the river to our camp to avenge the death of their friends, and if we ever get away from this Hermit Dome now's our chance."

"Do you know what caused the commotion among the outlaws down there awhile ago?" Bandy asked.

"The arrival of Jim Noel among them with the first news of our presence and work."

"Just so," said Kit. "I knew that Jim Noel had come to life before I left camp, and it was to put you on your guard that I came down here. But when I see'd this wagon reared up here on this Pisgah against the sky, and discovered the most o' the outlaws at the foot o' the hill, I couldn't resist the temptation to crawl past the sentinel and ascend the Hermit. And as I came up I met a Vulture that was goin' down to see what the racket was that had so suddenly broke out 'mong his friends. At 'easiest I supposed that war what he was goin' down for, for he come bulgin' along through the bushes ten feet to the jump, and stumblin' over my anatorny he fell hard enough to bust him, and he didn't git up ag'in, I thank you. Well, then I put on the Vulture cap and coat—they're in the wagon thar now—and come on up here and everlastin'ly demolished the Ingin guard afore he had time to sniff a rodent. Now these gals tells me that they heard Captain Vulture himself tell one o' his men to change the guards every two hours."

"And how long since the last change was made?" asked Bob.

"Half an hour afore I came, and so we've an hour to go on," replied Kit; "but for fear visitors might come up, we'd better be waftin' ourselves away."

"Let us retreat to the bushes at any rate," said Stonewall, "and there arrange our plans of retreat."

To this there was no objection, and so Bob assisted the girls from the wagon, and the four sought the shelter of the bushes a few rods to the east of the summit, and there stopped.

"It appears to me like a singular piece of

work pulling that wagon up here, and the outlaws camping at the foot of the hill," Stonewall remarked.

"I can tell you one reason why that was done, Robert," replied Ruth. "I heard Captain Vulture tell the guard that should soldiers, of whom he seems to be in constant fear, come upon them suddenly in force, to start the wagon down the acclivity on the river-side, and hurl the 'outfit,' as he called us, into eternity. If you noticed, the wagon was left so that with but little effort it could be started toward the river."

"The tempestuous hellyours!" exclaimed Old Kit; "why on earth did they want to murder you innocent gals?"

"I do not know, certain, but I heard enough said by our captors to make me think that I was to be killed if they could not escape with me. Captain Vulture talked as though my capture was a business transaction that he wanted to get through with as soon as possible."

"Then there may be some one else besides Vulture that is interested in your capture," said Stonewall—"some one that's got sight of your fair face in crossing the plains."

"It might be the very man we are huntin' down, Bobby, that notorious Rossgrove," said Old Kit.

"Who?" exclaimed Ruth, with a sudden start.

"An old crim'nal," replied Kit, "the head and brains o' the outlaw band. But I wonder if the soldiers are in the field?"

"I do not know," replied Ruth, "but the outlaws are uneasy and made a forced march to this place. They had expected to have got across the river to-night, but the sheer exhaustion of the wagon-horses compelled them to halt here."

"Well, as to our escape, Kit," said Stonewall, impatiently.

"We've got to get apast the cordon o' guards," Kit said, "that, I presume, are stationed clear 'round the land side o' this Dome. Of course, escape by the river are impossible on account o' the high banks and deep water."

"Can't we jump over into the river and swim like goats?" was the astonishing suggestion of Gypsy.

"Oh, you wild little breakneck!" replied Bandy, "you'll be for fightin' your way out next, won't you? What kind o' gal be you, anyhow? You'd make a mate for my wife, Sabina Bandy."

"Oh, mercy! he's married!" exclaimed the precocious little madcap; "isn't he ugly, Ruth, to have a wife?"

But for the prompt admonition of Ruth the girl would have followed up her question with an outburst of laughter.

"Child, you must not speak so loud," Ruth said in mild reproval, "or all these brave men have risked for us will have been in vain, and their lives, as well as our own again, will be endangered."

"That's so, Ruth," the child said, demurely; "my friend Margery always said my tongue was so rattle-tee-bang that it would get me into trouble. I'll not speak again till you tell me to."

"I must say Gypsy is a brave little soul," Ruth said, as if to apologize for the child's words; "for at the time of the outlaws' attack on our train in the mountain canyon she was concealed near, and with her rifle shot an outlaw dead, and it was this that got her into trouble, for her shot revealed her hiding-place, and an Indian dashed into the thicket and captured her. But pardon me, friends, for consuming our time in talk."

"That's all right, little gal," replied Kit, "I like to hear ye talk; but now to work. Bobby, I war jist cogitatin' over a plan to git away from here. That is, for you to take the gals and move around to the up-stream side o' the Dome, and there endeavor to pass the guards. To help you in this, I will stay here till you're half-way down the hill, then I'll push the wagon to the edge o' the slope and start it off down toward the plain on the down-stream side o' the hill. Of course the hill being so steep the vehicle will go a-flukin', and the noise will attract the foe away from your side o' the Dome, so's you can slip through with the females, and I'll git out some way, if I have to jump into the river and 'swim like a goat.'"

"A good idea, Kit, I should think," said Stonewall; "so come, girls, and let us be moving."

Taking each by the hand the gallant youth led the way down the hill, stooping low to keep under cover of the bushes. They had not made over half the distance to the river before they heard the low rumble of the wagon-wheels, and glancing back, Stonewall saw the white top moving against the sky down the hill—slowly at first, but rapidly increasing as it gathered momentum.

"Now let us hurry on faster, girls," the youth said, pleased with the way their plans were working.

But the rattle of the flying wagon growing plainer instead of fainter, caused the young plainsman to glance back again, and as he did so a cry burst from his lips.

"In God's name, what does that mean?" he exclaimed, almost aloud.

The wagon had turned in its course, from some cause or other, and was coming thundering down the hill, almost directly toward them!

And the excited voices of the outlaw guards in the valley could now be heard shouting to each other, and Stonewall could see several of them hurrying through the bushes to get in ahead of the flying wagon.

The young plainsman paused, at a loss to know what to do. He looked for Old Kit. He saw a form gliding down the hill toward him. He recognized it as Bandy's and he raised up to his full height that he might be seen by his friend. The next moment the old man had rejoined them.

"Cuss the tempestuous wagon!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "I started it straight t'other way, but one o' the front wheels struck a stone which caused it to turn off on a tangent and in this direction. Come, quick, or—Horn o' Joshua! hear that hellish howl! Stonewall, we're discovered!"

"Yes, but we are not caught, Kit," replied the Boy Trojan, a stern look of desperate determination upon his face, and an unnatural light blazing in his hitherto pleasant blue eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

KIT BANDY IN TROUBLE.

BANDY and his friends turned their faces toward the summit of The Hermit Dome, for their footsteps to that place must be retraced if they would elude the advancing foe.

"Allow me to assist you, Miss Graves," said Stonewall, who saw that Ruth was almost paralyzed with fear, and taking the maiden's hand drew her arm within his own and hurried away.

"And let me help you, Old Mr. Bandy," said Wild Gypsy, with artless innocence that would have provoked Kit to laughter under most any other circumstances.

Taking her little hand in his the old man glided up the steep hillside with the celerity of youth, the brave little girl keeping pace with him, while close behind them came a savage yelling like a demon to direct the course of his friends in the pursuit.

"Fiends take that howlin' savage!" Old Kit suddenly exclaimed; "I would shoot the lungs out o' him if I wer'n't afraid the tone o' my iron'd complicate affairs!"

"I'll stop him!" declared Stonewall Bob; and bidding Ruth move on he stopped, and snatching up a great stone that lay at his feet the young athlete raised it aloft, and like Jove hurling a thunderbolt from Olympus, he sent the terrible missile at the savage, who was but a few paces away, striking him full on the naked breast and crushing him to earth as though he had been a tender reed. A dull thud and a stifled gasp were the only sounds that followed the dreadful blow.

"A Boy Trojan you be, Stonewall," said Old Kit, with surprise and admiration; "but now, Bob, you go on with the gals and strike for the river east of the Dome and I'll j'ine you there. I'm goin' to act bushranger and lead them varmints on a false trail—go, boy! they are coming."

Anticipating the old detective's intentions Stonewall hurried on with the two girls—all three bending low to keep under cover of the bushes.

Suddenly the report of a pistol was heard to come from the hillside toward the west, and it was immediately succeeded by a series of peculiar yells and shouts that Bob knew emanated from the lips of the redoubtable Old Kit Bandy. These were answered by Indian war-whoops and outlaw cries, and in a few moments the excitement of the chase seemed tending off in another direction.

"Brave Old Kit!" exclaimed Stonewall, "he's succeeded in drawing the foe off our trail!"

"And may lose his own life by doing so," said Ruth.

"Kit Bandy is a most wonderful man, Miss Graves, and let us trust that a kind Providence, who has protected him for so many years, will bring him back to us unharmed."

Without further words the three hurried on around the Dome and down toward the river. They had almost reached the level valley. Wild Gypsy, who was as nimble-footed as a fawn, was a few paces in advance. A little opening lay before them. Across this they were moving when suddenly an outlaw sprang from the shadows on the opposite side of the glade, and leveling his rifle over Gypsy's head at Stonewall Bob, commanded:

"Halt there!"

The three quickly obeyed. Gypsy was not over four feet from the outlaw, and scarcely had the word of command fallen from his lips ere the child, upon the impulse of the moment, and with the quickness that a cat springs upon its prey, sprang at the villain and dashed both hands into his face with such violence as to stagger him backward. This act caused the muzzle of his rifle to tip out of range of Stonewall's breast, and before he could again gather himself into position, the Boy Trojan had him by the throat in a death-grip!

The villain struggled and gasped for breath,

but he was as feeble as an infant in the powerful grasp of the young giant.

"Choke him, Stonewall, choke him, purple!" exclaimed the reckless, fearless little Gypsy, excitedly.

"Go on, girls, go on," said the Boy Trojan, a little impetuously, as he bore the outlaw to the earth.

"Come, Gypsy," said the almost terrified Ruth, grasping the child by the arm and moving on; but they had gone but a few paces when Stonewall Bob was at their side again.

Not a sound had the maidens heard in his struggle with the outlaw, and the thoughtless, impulsive Gypsy asked:

"Stonewall Bob, where's the old robber?"

"Back there," was the young borderman's laconic reply.

"Oh! but I did give him a good scratch in the face," the girl declared, as she grasped Stonewall's big hand in both her own.

"Gypsy, we must keep quiet now," the youth said, "for we are in great danger."

The fugitives reached the valley without further trouble. They now turned to the left and moved along until they stood on the river-bank at the lower side of the Hermit Dome. Here they stopped to await the coming of Old Kit. The bushes at this point were taller. In fact, a few of them grew to the proportions of saplings and even trees, thus affording deeper shadows for the fugitives' retreat.

Stonewall glanced toward the east and saw the sky was growing red with morning dawn. He listened. He could hear the enemy on the opposite side of the Dome.

"Now if Kit were only here we might elude the foe before it grows light," Stonewall said, in an anxious tone.

"Oh, dear! just listen to those horrible yells!" cried Ruth, as a sudden outburst of savage howls rent the air.

Stonewall Bob turned his head like a startled deer, for the first time betraying a decided uneasiness. He stood for a moment listening, then said:

"Girls, we will have to move along."

"And not wait for Old Mr. Bandy?" exclaimed Gypsy.

"No, I'm afraid he's in trouble," replied the Boy Trojan; then he led the way along the river for some distance. Presently a series of hills rose up on their right, and as they moved on these grew more precipitous, and, trending in toward the Moreau, crowded the fugitives close to the edge of the stream. Stonewall finally began to entertain fears of their progress being stopped altogether, but with hopes, at the same time, that the frowning bluffs might soon be found receding from their encroachment on the river, he moved on.

In his hopes, however, the young plainsman was doomed to disappointment. Their progress grew more difficult at each step, and finally they were stopped altogether by the perpendicular bluffs reaching out to the river's brink.

By this time it was almost broad daylight, and to get out of their predicament it would be necessary for the fugitives to retrace their steps fully a quarter of a mile, and this would, in all probability, be attended with the greatest dangers. Had they possessed means to have crossed the river, escape would have been an easy matter.

Serious, however, as the situation was, the Boy Trojan did not become discouraged, but with a determination to meet the worst with a manly heart, he remained calm and apparently unmoved.

The sun coming up, the pale, beautiful face of Ruth Graves, and that of the brave little Gypsy, showed signs of weakness and fatigue, for their courage and endurance had been taxed to their utmost. It was a wonder to Stonewall, however, that they had borne their trials as well as they seemed to have done, but he knew they could not stand the strain much longer without rest of mind and body. The prospect for this was not very flattering, yet the youth resolved to do the best he could, realizing that on him now depended their safety and their lives.

Turning, they began retracing their footsteps up the river; but they had gone but a few paces when Stonewall's attention was attracted by the sight of a little thread-like stream of water that came creeping from among the bushes on the left and glided softly into the Moreau river. Calling a halt, he left the maidens to follow the stream, thinking that perhaps it flowed through a cut in the bluffs that would admit of their escape from the valley. But a few moments' investigation proved that he was mistaken as to the source of the stream. Not four rods from where he had left the girls concealed he found the head of the tiny rivulet, and what was most surprising of all, it was in a great hole or cavern in the steep bluff. This cavern was reached through a straight narrow cut or passage, which, as it ran back into the hill, grew to a depth of fifteen feet. Both the cave and the outlet had the appearance of having been made by the hand of man, though there were no indications of anything but wild beasts having been about there for years. From the cave to the end of the passage it was fully thirty feet, and yet not over two feet in width. The walls were

in a good state of preservation. The bottom of the cut was smooth and hard, the little rill of water flowing from the spring inside the cave having kept it clear of crumbling dirt and debris.

Upon reflection it suddenly occurred to Stonewall Bob that there was a hermit's dugout or cave in the vicinity of the Hermit Dome. He had heard his friend, Old Pegleg Sol, speak of it as having once been the home of a hermit hunter for years, and now felt certain that the place he had found was the deserted dugout of that hunter. But whether it was or not, the youth saw that the place would be, as one of defense, a perfect Gibraltar, and as the maidens were tired and weary, and the chances of escape from the valley against them, he resolved to take refuge therein until the coming of another night or friends to their relief, or until hunger forced them to abandon it.

Returning to the girls he told them of his discovery and his plans, and at once started for the dug-out. They entered the cut, one before the other, Stonewall taking the lead. The water flowing from the cave had worn itself a track in the bottom of the cut, so that the maidens were enabled to reach the cave dry-shod.

Notwithstanding the rise of the spring in one corner of the dug-out, the fugitives found the air light and pleasant, and light enough was admitted through the open approach to enable them to distinguish each other's features.

"Now, girls," said Stonewall, "you can sit down and rest with the assurance that we are safe as long as we are in this dug-out. If an outlaw or a savage attempts to reach us here through that passage, or a dozen of them for that matter, they will meet certain death."

The young plainsman seated himself where he could command a view of the cut. He had three revolvers, two heavy navies, and a smaller one that he had taken from the outlaw he had encountered awhile before day. These weapons he laid on the ground at his side.

Ruth Graves seated herself near him and engaged him in conversation, while the impulsive Gypsy proceeded to explore the darker corners of the dug-out.

Half an hour had passed when Ruth suddenly saw her companion start and grasp a revolver.

"What is it, Robert?" the maiden asked.

"An Indian—two of them, and an outlaw," he answered, calmly; "they are searching the ground for our tracks, but have no fears."

The savages and the outlaw had stopped near the entrance to the cut leading into the cave. They were searching the ground closely, and when Bob saw one of the Indians point downward and then turn toward the cave with a quick, excited movement, he knew that his and the maidens' tracks had been discovered leading into the dug-out.

But Stonewall Bob was not altogether surprised. He was too much of a borderman not to have considered the possibility of their being tracked by the lynx-eyed savages, but in taking the risk he felt sure it would be far less dangerous than to attempt to go back up the river in daylight.

The red-skins and outlaw stood and conversed together in low tones for several minutes, ever and anon glancing up the passage toward the cave. They seemed to be undecided as to what to do. It seemed that they fully realized the advantage that one in the cave would have over them, and hesitated about advancing.

Stonewall was sorely tempted to drop one of them, but considering discretion the better part of valor he kept quiet.

Presently the three foes departed, and then Bob made up his mind that they had gone off for assistance, or else to lay in ambush for those in the dug-out to come out. It proved to be the former, for in the course of an hour a large number of outlaws and savages returned to the entrance to the passage, and what was the most startling to the Boy Trojan, was the presence of Kit Bandy among them, a bound and fettered captive!

CHAPTER X.

IN THE SADDLE AGAIN.

WE will now return to the camp of our friends on the Moreau, for around those left there incidents of an exciting character have been accumulating.

As soon as Kit Bandy had departed in hopes of intercepting Jim Noel or to aid Stonewall Bob should the wily outlaw's escape involve him in danger, Old Rattler began to realize that their position was not the safest with but three of them left to defend it against an unknown number of lurking foes. He conferred with Zeke Ruble and suggested that their fire be extinguished and their horses all brought in from grass, saddled and bridled and everything made ready for any emergency be it fight or flight. To this Ruble was agreed, and the horses, including Kit and Stonewall's, were all brought up and saddled and bridled. Then Rattler took the dead outlaws' belts with their revolvers in the holsters and buckled three of them around his horse's neck, and one around the neck of Bandy's horse, saying as he did so:

"We may need them tools afore we git."

through with our blunder in lettin' Jim Noel get away."

Their blankets, provision, ammunition supplies, and in fact everything belonging to them were securely packed on the back of one of the outlaws' horses; and to Zeke Ruble it seemed that these preparations for departure had been suggested to Old Rattler's mind by an intuitive forewarning, for scarcely were they completed before One-Armed Phil came hurrying into camp with the startling information that a large force of outlaws and red-skins had dismounted from their ponies about half a mile down the river and were then advancing, no doubt to overwhelm and slay them.

"Boys, let's mount and amble," said Old Rattler, "for they're a little too frequent in numbers for us with Kit and the Boy Trojan away."

"But what about them?" asked One-Armed Phil; "suppose they should return here expecting to find us where they left us?"

"We'll drift back here," replied Rattler, "and if the boys don't git into trouble they'll loiter 'round here somewhar, if they find us away, till we git back. We can take a little gallop out into the open plain, and if our enemies want us let 'em come after us hard. But fust let's turn them outlaws' hosses all loose 'cept the one we've got for a pack-nag, and cut up their bridles and saddle-girths, and if they do catch the animals again, they'll have no harness for 'em."

It required but a few moments to turn the horses loose and destroy the usefulness of the bridles and saddles. This done, the three mounted and rode out of the belt of timber into the broad, moonlit valley. They were scarcely forty rods from the grove when the crash of firearms behind them, and the whistling of bullets through the air around them, told that they were not a moment too soon in their departure for a moonlight ride over the plain.

"Hol hol ye red-rinded varmints," exclaimed Old Rattler, glancing back over his shoulder, "you war a leetle too late!"

"But, by gracious! we were not too soon," declared Ruble. "Whatever possessed you, Rattler, to prepare for this ride? Did you have a warning—a presentiment of coming danger—that is, any more than might naturally be expected?"

"Whole scads o' presentiments, Ruble," replied Rattler. "You see I've rummaged around 'mong Ingins, death and destruction so long that I can tell when danger's comin' by the state o' the atmosphere. Ever since Kit and Stunwall left, the darkness has smelt and tasted sour and even the moonlight seemed a little frowy. And then besides— Zip! I tell ye that bullet cut close; some feller in that gang must have a long-ranger like my Old Epidemic, and now if—"

"Suppose we move a little faster," suggested Ruble, "and get out of range of their guns?"

"We can do that, Zeke," replied the old borderman.

So they dashed on at a gallop.

The foe soon ceased firing and all became quiet.

"Do you think they'll attempt to follow us?" asked One-Armed Phil.

"Most assuredly they will," answered Old Rattler; "and jist as soon as they can git astride their hosses they'll come for us like ki-yotes for a wounded buf'lo. But I'm not afeard o' them, and if your hosses can hold their wind and shuffle their feet like Old Comet here, and the foe'll only foller till daylight, I'll give you an exhibition o' the Red River Epidemic's way of fightin' on the retreat. If I've room to spread myself in—to maneuver in—I don't keer for the hull red-rinded nation. I'd 'a' destroyed the hull frammity anyhow afore this, if tweren't for throwin' so many missionaries, soldiers and Ingins out o' our employment onto a sufferin' world to become politicians, thieves and beggars. Oh! I've a big heart in me, and I feel for the unfortunate and distressed, but I love better 'n all to feel for an Ingins' vitals with this 'ere old rifle. I tell you she's a nailer, and when she sings somethin's got to come—somethin' goin' to be heard tear like ole buckskin. But not changin' the subject, boys, I want to say that o' all the stupendous, lily-lipped hummers that ever sot a number-sixteen moccasin on Dakota soil, that Stunwall Bob takes the corn-pone."

"Yes, but the brave young giant came mighty near passin' in his checks to-night when Jim Noel belted him over the head with that club," said Ruble.

"Yes, that war a villainous blow, but he soon paid Noel back with compound interest and fees for collection, by dispersin' the scamp's nose all over his battered face. But honest, now, did you fellers ever hear o' more deception since Adam did eat o' the apple, than's been played on the banks o' the Moreau to-night? Fust come Rancey Bradstreet and Jimmy Noel as befogged travelers, and we took them in, and then One-Armed Phil took in Brad with a bullet, and Noel took Bob over the head with a club. Then follered Bob playin' the stapor, and finally the delectable Musket-Mouth and the angelic Slick-shoe—you, Mr. Ruble—got in their work with 'nails and fancy trimmin's—the whole thing endin' with the escape of the dead Jim Noel. Oh!

it makes me sad and sorr'ful to know thar's so much wickedness and deception in this bad old world; and as I lay to-night thinkin' it over, my eyes filled with tears—for the wind blowed the smoke of our camp-fire into my face, and I made up my mind that— By the great Rosycrusians! there they come billeteescoot! Now, boys, you can put on a little more speed, and you, Comet, can show Mr. Ruble, how frolicky you can paddle the sod. Look, Ruble, how superbly he stretches out—how greedily he reaches for the miles before him. Do you know why I call him Comet? It's a fact, that he can run so all-fired fast that the electricity generated by friction is emitted in sparks from the end o' the hairs on his tail, and it's a beaucheful sight to behold on a dark night to see him go streamin' across the plain like a meteor across the sky."

The pursuing foe could not only be heard, but seen, but after a couple miles' racing it was plain enough to the fugitives that the distance was widening between them.

The course of our friends was toward the southwest, and after riding some five miles they came to a creek whose shores were fringed with willows and wild-plum bushes; and occasionally a little *motte* of some pretensions raised its dark crown against the sky.

Along the right shore of this stream the fugitives pursued their way, and when at length they had left their enemy behind out of sight and hearing, they slackened their speed somewhat to husband the strength of their horses.

Old Rattler at once opened a conversation with his friends, but to the amusement of the latter the old borderman did most of the talking in his inimitable way interlarded with bits of whimsical humor; and while he was thus rattling away in his happiest vein, a voice from the depths of a little *motte* near which they were passing called out:

"Who goes there?"

The voice was clear and sharp, and sounded like that of a boy or woman. It was couched more in the spirit of an inquiry than a command.

The three fugitives quickly drew rein.

"I'll declare I believe that's the voice of Rambling Dan, the Boy Mountaineer!" exclaimed Zeke Ruble.

Old Rattler did not know who Rambling Dan was, but he bawled out as soon as Zeke had spoken the name:

"That you, Dan?"

"Yes; but who are you?" again inquired the voice.

"I'm Old Thomas Rattler, thundergust and epidemic, and by my side ride Zeke Ruble, the hunter, and One-Armed Phil, the avenger. Now, do you want any truck of us?"

"Ride this way, gentlemen," requested another voice from the *motte*, "you are some of the men we seek more than all others."

"That was Rambling Dan's voice, I know," said Ruble, "and I should say the party was all right—Dan I know is."

With this assurance the three rode toward the grove though Rattler kept his hand on his revolver.

When several paces from it the lithe form of a boy of perhaps seventeen years of age stepped from the bushes and advanced toward them. He was clad in buckskin and armed with rifle and pistols. He had an open, manly countenance, a big hazel eye with the expression of a girl's, and a voice soft and pleasant.

To Ruble the youth was known as Rambling Dan, the Boy Mountaineer. He was the son of a Deadwood miner, and his love for a rifle and the hills wherein the deer abounded had made him a noted hunter, and there was scarcely a foot of the great mountain-hills within a circle of fifty miles of Deadwood but what was known to this Boy Mountaineer.

Zeke Ruble sprang from his saddle and grasped the boy warmly by the hand, saying as he did so, in an excited voice:

"Dan, I am glad to meet you: but I hope you bring no bad news."

"Mr. Ruble," replied the boy, his voice choked, "we're in pursuit of some outlaws and Indians that carried off some girls, but here comes my friends, and I will introduce you to them."

Two men came from the *motte*, and approached the three fugitives, all of whom had dismounted. One of them was a short, stout man of perhaps thirty years, with his head tied up in a red silk handkerchief. The other was a tall, straight man, with a fine, robust physique, a Roman cast of features, a full, iron-gray beard, and a noble head set upon a stout, muscular neck. He wore a blue flannel shirt, the collar of which lay open, revealing a deep, massive chest.

The first of these two men Rambling Dan introduced as Jackson, and the last as Mr. Mahlon Graves, and at mention of the last name, Old Rattler exclaimed:

"By the great Rosycrusians! I've heard your name before, Mr. Graves—heard Stunwall Bob speak o' you just to-night."

"It is very likely if you have seen him," replied Mahlon Graves, "for within the last two weeks that gallant young plainsman rescued my daughter from death by drowning in a mad,

rushing river; but God knows it would have been better, perhaps, had she died in the flood."

The man spoke in a tone of bitter anguish, and all could see that he was deeply moved by some distressing weight upon his mind and heart. And knowing what he did of the canvas-covered wagon he had seen that night, One-Armed Phil readily divined his troubles, and said:

"Then your daughter is a captive in the hands of the Red Vultures and the savages?"

"Yes, sir; but how did you learn the fact?" replied Graves.

"I saw a wagon that Stonewall said was yours moving over the plain escorted by those villainous marauders. The tilt of the wagon was closed all around, and I knew by that that something precious was in the vehicle."

"Yes, that is the party that captured my child," said Graves. "When Stonewall Bob left us a few days ago on the Cheyenne river we had joined a large party of gold-seekers bound for Deadwood, and we had made arrangements to travel with them through to the hills, at any rate. But their teams were almost worn out, while ours were comparatively fresh, and so, as we neared the mountains we bid them good-by, and pushed on alone, having all assurances that we were past every danger from outlaw or Indian. But in this we were doomed to bitter disappointment. We were one day's journey in the hills when we were surprised by a band of Red Vultures and Indians, and after a hard-fought battle we were overpowered. All of the men were killed but myself and friend Jackson here, and it was just a miracle that we escaped. My daughter was taken prisoner, placed in one of the wagons, and driven off in this direction. And what was most surprising, during the attack upon us a shot was fired by some one concealed in the bushes up the side of the canyon, and an Indian was killed. Another savage scaled the side of the acclivity, and a few moments later came dragging from the bushes down into the valley a young girl—a mere child of not over fourteen or fifteen years. Her, too, the murderous demons carried off in the wagon."

"It was Wild Gypsy," said Rambling Dan.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Ruble, with a start, "is that true, Dan?"

"What is the gal to you, ole feller?" asked Rattler of the excited hunter; "do you know Wild Gypsy?"

"I have seen her—she's a bright and lovely child—the daughter of some old hermit trapper," replied Ruble in a tone that was not entirely satisfactory to Rattler.

"Did you three fellows expect to rescue the captives from thirty or forty outlaws and Indians?" asked One-Armed Phil.

"We did not know what we could do," replied Mahlon Graves. "After the attack we chanced to meet this brave boy, and he at once volunteered to go with us in pursuit of the foe which we concluded to follow until they deviated from a line with a certain point where Kit Bandy, the detective scout, and a party of friends were to meet at a certain time on the Moreau river."

Rattler started, and advancing to the Boy Mountaineer, asked:

"Boy, I'd like to know how you found out 'bout the meetin' o' Kit Bandy and his friends on the Moreau, when the hull expedition war to be a secret?"

"Rattler, old pard," said Zeke Ruble, before the boy could reply, "yonder comes our pursuers, and we'd better be goin' or prepare to receive them."

"Exactly so, Zeke," replied Rattler, glancing over the moonlit plain; "but, boys, we've been chased 'round 'bout enough to-night, and seem' we're six, now, and got a darlin' position, I perpose we drap back into the shadders and give the varmints a reception—turn loose an epidemic among them."

To this all quickly consented, and retreating into the *motte*, our three friends secured their horses, and then, rifles in hand, took their position to receive the allied foe who came thundering over the plain screaming and howling like demons of the night.

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

IN silence the six whites in the *motte* awaited the approach of the foe.

A look of desperate determination was upon the noble face of Mahlon Graves, and his eyes glowed with a fire that told of the spirit of revenge burning in his breast.

Rambling Dan, the Boy Mountaineer, stood with his rifle at a trail, his big eyes fixed on the approaching foe with an eager gaze, yet maintaining the coolness and patience of an old veteran.

Finally Old Rattler gave the word to fire, and almost instantly the six rifles spoke as one, and that they spoke to a purpose was evident from the cries of dismay and yells and curses of the foe who, when they saw the red tongues of flame burst from the shadows of the grove and heard the deadly bullets among them, became panic-stricken and like a flock of birds scattered and fled in every direction.

Our friends heard the shouts and curses of a

white man endeavoring to rally his terror-stricken crowd, and who succeeded in stopping three or four outlaws, but the deadly rifle of Old Rattler kept playing on them so lively that even they were forced to seek safety in the distance.

Then it was that Old Rattler leaped out into the moonlight, and, swinging his cap in the air, shouted forth at the top of his brazen lungs:

"Hoo-rah for victory and the Untamed Tempest! Go it, you red-rinded heathens and white cowards!"

Owing to the state of the atmosphere his voice could be heard a long ways off, and it having reached the ears of the foe they replied with a sickly shout of defiance.

"Durn their eyes, that yell comes out a little smothery," the old borderman said. "But didn't they run plump up ag'in a sleepin' hurricane that time? By the great Rosycrusians! it wer'n't no fight at all, and I'd fixed myself for a buzz-saw-and-bear fight, and it leaves my blood in a bad condition, for thar's one o' my spells comin' on me, boys, and I must—"

"What kind of spells? Do you have fits?" asked Rambling Dan.

"Nary fit," replied Rattler, with a laugh, "but volcanic spells o' hot flushes that fairly fries my moccasins and crimps my hair, but I'll go out and pull up a tree or two and maybe I'll rekiver. But say, boys, now many saddles did we empty that whirl?"

"Four or five anyhow," answered Ruble.

"A miserable poor haul!" said Rattler, contemptuously; "if the varmints had had sand enough to come up and mingled with us we'd 'a' made it fraternally hot for 'em. But if the gang is the one, or a part o' the one, that's carryin' them gals off, maybe Old Kit and Stonewall Bob'll git in their work and rescue the feminines while so many are away from the wagons."

"That Robert Comstock, or Stonewall Bob, is truly a brave and gallant youth," said Mahlon Graves. "I have seen him tried, and I daresay that there are few old bordermen to possess a better knowledge of prairie craft than he."

"Brave and gallant!" exclaimed Old Rattler; "that don't express it, Mr. Graves. He is a hull multitude in one—a tempestuous young Ajax, a lily-lipped hummer. When Philip thar reported a wagon with certain marks on its kiver movin' over the plain, he said at once it war one o' yours, Mr. Graves, and in fourteen seconds he war swallowed up in the darkness—gone to inquire into the cause o' the wagon bein' there. And a few minutes later Old Kistsie Bandy, the shambangest old goggled-eyed detective that ever laddled out lies to a lovin' friend like hot honey, or trailed down a criminal, follered the Boy Trojan. When we hear from them two—that delicious pair—we'll hear somethin' wuth listenin' to if it's nothin' but one o' Bandy's wild-eyed whoppers."

By this time it was almost day, and after a short conference the party concluded to remain there until morning, and then advance together to the old camp on the Moreau, where they hoped to meet Kit and Stonewall.

No one attempted to sleep. Zeke Ruble and Mahlon Graves kept constantly on the move, pacing the circuit of the grove and watching the surrounding plain with feverish impatience. Zeke manifested as much uneasiness and trouble of mind as Graves, and this did not escape the notice of Old Rattler, who, when alone with One-Armed Phil, said:

"Philip, that man Ruble puzzles me. I tell you thar's somethin' more on his mind than a share o' the reward offered for the capture of John Rossgrrove, the murderer."

"I know it—I have noticed it myself," responded One-Armed Phil, "and since our meeting with Mr. Graves and party his uneasiness has been quite marked. It may all come from his knowledge of our surrounding danger and his determination to guard against it. And another thing: I heard him and that dashing boy, Rambling Dan, in a low conversation awhile ago when off alone. Of course, I did not follow them up to hear what they said, but they happened to stop near where I stood. I only caught a part of their conversation, but enough to convince me that the captive girl, Wild Gypsy, is known to him and the boy. And since I heard that fragmentary talk, I have been wondering what relation the face of Wild Gypsy bears to the face I saw reflected in the mountainspring, and what relation Zeke Ruble bears to each of them."

"Oh, I reckon it's all fancy, Phil," replied Old Rattler, "though I'll swear by the Rosycrusians that I saw that face in the water myself. But since then we've passed through so much excitement, and had no sleep, and see'd so much bloodshed and destruction, that we're gittin' into such a condition o' mind that we can imagine anything. Why, if we don't find Kit and Stonewall when we git back to our old camp, jist like as any way I'll figger out in my roarin' tempestuous old head, that the Boy Trojan and that old buccaneer have rescued the gals and run away with 'em themselves."

At this juncture a footstep sounded near, and a voice said:

"I beg your pardon, friends, for interrupting you, or darin' to listen to your conversation."

Rattler and One-Armed Phil started. It was the voice of Zeke Ruble. A faint look of resentment swept over the faces of the two men, but Rattler, with a forced laugh, said:

"They say listeners seldom hear any good o' themselves."

"That will not hold good in my case," said Ruble, seeing that the old hunter was inclined to reproach him for his silence; "I heard nothing bad about myself, if I did hear you express yourselves as to my being an enigma and a puzzle. I'll confess now that there is something else in my mind than a share of the reward offered for the capture of John Rossgrrove, and I am goin' to free my mind and heart of the burden, and this moment, too. Phil, you say you saw that girl Wild Gypsy as you came through the mountains?"

"Yes, sir; that is what she said her name was," answered Phil.

"Well, she is your sister, Phil—your sister Mary."

"What? my sister?" cried Phil, grasping the hunter's arm, "Ruble, you are jesting! do not trifle with my feelings."

"I am not, sir," declared Ruble, in a tone that indicated a great relief of mind and conscience; "let me tell you: the evening of the same day of the massacre of your parents I passed by the smoldering embers of the burnt cabin. A mile from there I found, hiding in the brush on Willow Creek, Margery Ashton and your little baby sister, Mary. The child was asleep at the time, but Margery was almost crazed with terror. She told me that she had taken little Mary out to take care of her that day for your mother, and that she was gathering flowers along the creek when the outlaws came and killed her friends and fired the house. She spoke of another party that she saw come to the ruins afterward, but supposing they were outlaws, also, she remained in concealment."

"They were the stockmen that rescued me," said Phil.

"Yes, but Margery knew nothing of your escape. On the contrary I have often heard her tell Gypsy, as we call Mary, about her handsome brother, but I believe she always called him Jack."

"That was the nickname I went by," said Philip, his breast throbbing with emotion.

"Well, she always told Gypsy that you had been killed," Ruble went on, "and they know no better to this day. I took the children when I found them, placed them upon my horse and carried them to my mountain home near where you first saw Gypsy. There have we dwelt all these years. But I offered to send the girls to a settlement that they might find their way to friends, but to my surprise and infinite joy they did not want to leave me to make their home among strangers, even though relatives. No one knows what loving companions those girls have been to me in my lonely hunter's home. It is true, I had a friend in an old Scotchman that lived with me many years after I adopted the girls. Poor old Sandy! he died only a year ago, and was a true and noble friend, but was not to me what those dear girls have been. Had they been my own children I could not have thought more of them, and I believe they will bear me witness that I have been a father to them. As they grew older I managed to get hold of some books, magazines and papers, and, in fact, everything I could to amuse and instruct them. I taught them to read and write, and—"

"Great Rosycrusians!" broke in Old Rattler, "who ever hearn o' a borderman like you and me, Ruble, teachin' school. It war a good joke ye played on ther gals."

"Why, blame it, Rattler, I can read and write a little, and what I didn't know old Sandy did. At any rate, Margery has grown to a noble womanhood, and Mary, or my Gypsy, is one of the most lovely, bright and vivacious little souls on earth. She has no fear of danger and is a wonderful huntress for a girl, and as a rifle-shot she is remarkable."

"We know what she can do with a rifle," said Rattler, as his mind reverted to the perforated cup and the dead catamount.

"And you tell me, Ruble," said One-Armed Phil, "that that lovely little savage is my sister! and that she whose face I saw reflected in the spring is Margery Ashton?"

"Yes, beyond all doubt, Philip," replied Ruble; "but I did not discover the fact until this evening when I heard of the story you told of your empty sleeve and of the killing of the man Bradstreet. I should have told you the truth then, but I concluded to wait until a more favorable time. The news that Graves's party brings of Gypsy's capture has hastened this revelation. As to Margery, I presume—I hope she is safe, but the capture of Gypsy will almost kill her. If Margery saw you, Philip, she probably did not recognize in the bearded, one-armed man of five-and-twenty her boy lover of thirteen."

"Yes, but by Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler, "he seemed to recognize her, for he almost grabbed at the vision in the water."

"I'll confess," said Phil, "that in the vision I saw in the spring the face of the one I had loved as a boy was before me as plain as life. But after all, this revelation brings grief as well as joy to learn that my sister is in the power of the

outlaws and death may claim her before her brother."

"Trust in Heaven, boy," said Ruble, with true Christian earnestness and grace.

"And Old Kit Bandy and Stonewall Bob," added Rattler, "for while the Lord kindly provides ways and means, we've got to buckle right down to work or we're goin' to git left. The source o' all is God, but if we hunters git a deer-skin, or beaver-pelt, or buffalo-hump, we've got to dust around and find it, for no one's goin' to bring it up to our door; and then if an Ingin gits arter our scalps, we've got to tramp or fight like darnation."

"Quite a philosophical view of the matter," said Ruble, in doubt as to whether the lecture was intended for him or Phil; "and there is no doubt in my mind but that Bandy and the Boy Trojan will give a good account of themselves. But, friends, we've talked here quite awhile. It's broad daylight."

True enough it was. Several bright-eyed birds were twittering in the trees overhead where the first beams of the rising sun were gilding the emerald foliage with a sheen of burnished gold.

The three were about to rejoin their friends when Rambling Dan came hurrying up to where they were and said:

"Say, folks, a robber that got wounded in the skirmish last night, has crawled into the grove and Mr. Graves wants you to come at once. He don't know whether to wind up the feller's business with a pistol, or bind up his wounds with a bandage!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE "PRAIRIE DOLPHINS" AND THE INDIAN IN WHITE.

RATTLER and his friends soon reached Graves and Jackson's side, and found them standing by the wounded outlaw, who sat leaning against a tree-trunk in dreadful agony. The fellow was deathly pale, and his clothes saturated with his life-blood. When Old Rattler spoke he looked up. His eyes and One-Armed Phil's met, and in one instant a change swept over the avenger's face, and grasping his revolver he drew it from his belt, fairly hissing through his set teeth:

"He is one of the murderers of my friends!"

"Hold on, young man," gasped the outlaw, throwing up his hand as if to ward off the shot. "I'm 'bout gone—don't waste your ammunition—you'll need it."

Replacing his weapon Phil turned away, saying:

"Friends, pardon me for threatening to shoot a dying man even though he is a murderer."

"Old feller," said Rattler, addressing the outlaw, "you've got a bad dose, hav'n't ye?"

"Yes," replied the villain, with but little apparent compunction of conscience, "but if my friends hadn't deserted me like cowards I might 'a' lived. My veins have run dry and I'm 'bout gone."

"And isn't it 'bout time you war goin'! You've been a robber and murderer many years," said Ruble.

"How do you know I have?"

"It has been thirteen years since you helped murder the Noble and Ashton families on Willow Creek in Nebraska. That one-armed man recognized you as one of the murderers."

"Yes, Jim Noel told us about him killin' Bradstreet. But that was a wicked job killin' them families. It was more the work of spite against them than anything else," admitted the dying wretch. "But I'm the last one of them, boys, and I'll soon be gone."

"You fellers ought to 'a' known more than to fool 'round an epidemic last night," said Rattler; "but seein' you have got to die, don't you want to make a confession—clean out your heart and approach your God with as light a load as possible?"

"I have no fears of the future," replied the outlaw; "I don't believe there is a God or he'd never made so much wickedness."

"Old Infidel, thar's whar you're goin' to cork yourself," said Rattler. "It's all bosh to talk 'bout thar bein' no God, and you'll find it out afore long. He's not responsible for your sins, but will hold you to account for it, and when 'ou're writhin' in torturin' flames remember the warnin' Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic give you."

"You're consolin', old man, I sw'ar you be," said the outlaw, writhing in his pain.

"You don't deserve pity when you deny your Maker."

"Be you a preacher, ole man?" the outlaw asked.

"No," replied Rattler, demurely; "but I am a converter of sinners into quiet, peaceable men. Lead has been the argyment I have used. And yit I hate to see a man go into eternity as you are goin'."

"You needn't worry yourself 'bout me," the unrepentant wretch said, in a dogmatical tone.

"Well, would you answer me a few questions before you die?" Rattler finally asked.

"Fire in, stranger," the outlaw said; "if I can do the livin' any good I'm willin' to do it, but I'll answer sich questions as I please."

"You're gamey, old feller," said Rattler, "but what I'd like to know is how many men b'long to the Red Vulture band?"

"Not as many as thar did," the outlaw replied with ghastly facetiousness: "but thar's still enuff left to send you fellers all over the range. The outlaw-Ingins are helpin' the Vultures."

"I'm aware of that, but is Captain Vulture your real leader, or isn't there another feller that doesn't take to the saddle, that lords it over your band?"

"Yes, there is," was the reply.

"Would you object to give me his true name, if you knew it?"

"He's called the Devil," with grim humor.

"True, very true," declared Rube, with a faint smile.

"But say, old man," Rattler repeated, "isn't there a fellow in your band named Rossgrove? John Rossgrove?"

"There may be, but none o' the boys ever give their true name when they join the Red Vultures. It's ag'inst the rules o' the band to do so. All they want to know is what a man will do and can do—not what he's done to send him into the hills, for nobody ever becomes an outlaw till he's done su'thin' stout."

"This man Rossgrove," continued Rattler, "is a rather slender man with blue eyes, and used to wear a full beard, and has a little scar above his right eye—any such a feller there answerin' that description?"

"Yes, sir; there is," answered the outlaw; "he's called Blue Bear, and he's a bad man. You want to git the army out if you ever git him. But, say, won't you give me a drink of water?"

"Yes; you shall have water," replied Rattler.

Rambling Dan was sent down to the creek with a canteen for water, which was given the dying man, Rube holding it to his parched and bleeding lips.

Inflammation had set in and our friends saw that it was a mere question of time until his death. They could do nothing for him except to give him water; and after lingering along for three hours he died, game to the last.

Our friends now turned their attention to their own needs, the first of which was breakfast. But it required but a few minutes to prepare and eat this meal, then they mounted their horses and started back toward the Moreau river, the coming of day having disclosed the field of vision clear of enemies.

They reached their old camp on the river to find it entirely deserted. Even the bodies of the dead outlaws had been removed.

After looking around the place awhile Rattler said:

"Neither Kit nor Stonewall are about, that's sure; nor are there anything that indicates they have been. Now, I'm a leetle oneasy folks, 'bout them boys, and I'm a-goin' to make a reconnaissance down the stream. If I find that gang o' red-rinds and outlaws down thar, I'll think the boys are somewhars about, but if they're gone, I don't know what I'll think 'bout it. Now, keep your eyes peeled."

With this injunction the old borderman took his departure, and in the course of an hour he returned, bringing the information that the foe were not only in camp down the river, but that they had been reinforced while he was in sight of them by not less than forty outlaw-Indians that came down Sand Creek valley from their haunts in the mountains. But not one word of information could he give in regard to Stonewall Bob, Old Kit Bandy or the captive girls.

A look of hopeless despondency clouded the face of One-Armed Phil and Zeke Rube, whose interest now in the welfare of Gypsy had become mutual, while Mahlon Graves seemed almost prostrated by the discouraging news the hunter brought. He bit his lip to keep back an outburst of grief, yet despite his efforts tears glistened in his eyes.

"And now what's more, friends," Rattler finally went on, "it will never do for us to step here in this grove. That great horde o' red-rinds and outlaws might pounce upon us at any time and they are too many for us in the woods where they can fight their own way. We'd be far safer on the open plain where we could fight or run as we deemed best. I know we've got the horses that can do the clean thing runnin', and that we're the concentrated cyclone that can do the fightin'."

"That's all very true, Rattler," affirmed Rube, "and the sooner we get out of here the better it'll be for us, I presume."

The matter being thus settled, the six again mounted their horses and rode back into the open valley, still keeping in charge the horses belonging to Bandy and Stonewall, as well as the outlaw's animal upon which their effects were packed.

They shaped their course toward the southeast and finally drew rein in the open valley two miles from the river. North of them the crest of the Hermit Dome rose up clear and distinct, and over it and up and down its sides they could see the foe on horseback and on foot moving.

One-Armed Phil took from among his effects a spy-glass that he had brought with him. With this the party scanned the Hermit Dome and could almost distinguish the features of the bearded, booted outlaws, but nowhere could

they see Kit or Stonewall, or either of the captive girls. There seemed to be, however, quite a commotion among the enemy, but this was doubtless created by the presence of our friends on the plain.

The latter had dismounted in a long, gentle depression in the valley where the grass was tall, thick and luxuriant, and, without removing the bits from their horses' mouths, permitted them to graze about, though at no time allowing them to get beyond the end of the reins away.

Throwing himself upon the ground, Old Rattler exclaimed:

"By their great Rosycrusians! I don't know whenever I had to camp in view o' the enemy afore and dasn't advance or wouldn't retreat, but hang around like a pack o' Bedouins watchin' a caravan. Think o' it, boys, here we lay under the warm sun in their steamy grass, kickin' up our heels like a shoal o' sportive dolphins—prairie dolphins."

"Well, what is your opinion, anyway, Rattler, by this time, about the prolonged absence of Kit and Bob?" asked Rube.

"Rube, I've run clear outen opinions, but I still trust in that old heliotrope and that big sunflower bloomin' out into view yit. But look, you can see now with the naked eye them red-rinds and the outlaws grouped about on the Dome. I reckon they're takin' in the landscape like Moses o' old, and punchin' each other in the ribs as they contemplate the spectacle o' we folks loungin' out here like a bevy o' mermaids wallerin' in the sand. But—Oho! do you see that? There comes ridin' this way from the foot o' the Dome a few bold crusaders. I wonder if they venture forth to do battle?"

"To draw us into a trap, in all probability," said One-Armed Phil, scanning the horsemen with his glass; "they are all Indians."

"I shouldn't think Red Vultures war as plentiful to-day as they war yesterday, since an epidemic broke out 'mongst 'em," said Rattler, "and I reckon Cap. Vulture's goin' to economize on his fellers and let the red-skins buck ther tempest awhile. Thar's jist six o' them Arabs comin' this way, and so I'm o' the opinion that they're puttin' up a job to draw us into a dead-fall. But then we're no mess o' fools to be drawn into danger like an antelope with a red rag. If they want to fight they'll have to come over here and we can 'commodate 'em."

The six Indians boldly advanced over the valley as if they intended to dash right down upon them, but this gave the whites no uneasiness, and with their hands on their rifles they calmly awaited their coming.

When about five hundred yards away Old Rattler arose to his feet and swinging aloft his cap uttered a yell of defiance.

But instead of his actions inciting the red-skins to renewed speed as he had hoped it would, they immediately reined in their ponies to a walk.

"Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler, in disappointment, "I'm afeard I skeered 'em out instead o' incitin' 'em on, and now we'll be cheated out a little rifle exercise."

The warriors continued to advance at a walk, but finally drew rein when about eighty rods away. Old Rattler quickly raised his rifle as if to fire but, quick as a marmot drops into its hole, every savage threw himself to the opposite side of his pony out of sight.

"Ther damasked cowards!" exclaimed Rattler in disgust, as he lowered his gun and again seated himself on the grass; "I'd ought to bore pony and red-skin both through, but then I don't want to waste a shot, and when Epidemic speaks I intend smethin' shall respond."

"I'd like to pop one o' 'em myself," said Rambling Dan, the Boy Mountaineer, a look of eagerness upon his brown boyish face, "and if they'll edge this way a little closer I will show Mr. Rattler how a boy can handle a rifle."

"That's the talk, boy," replied Rattler approvingly. "I love to look upon a brave boy for it makes me think thar's a chance o' some one comin' on to step into the shoes, so to speak, o' Old Tom Rattler. I can see by the flicker o' yer eyes, Daniel, that you're a lily-lipped hummer. But I don't think 'em red-rinds'll come close enough for us to wing 'em. Moses! how their wild, tempestuous start from the Dome did simmer down to a summer zephyr. They thought we prairie dolphins were green critters, but I reckon they begin to realize that they are the sappy bulbs by this time, and can't 'draw' us old blisters any more'n a poultice o' skunk-cabingo'll draw the solidity outen a stone."

Seeing the whites remained perfectly inactive the six red-skins finally began maneuvering about. They galloped to and fro across the plain yelling like demons and gesticulating in a defiant and excited manner. This they kept up for fully an hour, going through every performance their savage minds could conceive, in hopes of provoking the whites into pursuit of them. Finally four of them dismounted and the other two taking all the ponies started off toward the Hermit Dome, but even this ruse did not tempt the whites to even rise to their feet, and the ponies were brought back and all again mounted.

Finally their stock of expedients seemed exhausted, and after a consultation they turned and rode away toward the Dome in evident dis-

gust. But they had not gone far when all discovered another horseman galloping out from the direction of the Hermit Dome toward them, and they drew rein to await his coming.

Our friends had discovered the horseman also, and after gazing at him a moment, Rattler said: "That critter seems to be dressed in white, don't he? Philip, pull it up with yer glass and see what it is."

"It is a woman!" declared Phil, glancing at the horseman through his glass.

"Ther Rosycrusians! it surely can't be one o' the gals!"

"It's a woman dressed in white," One-Armed Phil went on. "she has on a hat gay with fluttering ribbons. Here, take the glass and look for yourself, Rattler."

After scanning the horseman through the glass a few moments the old borderman exclaimed:

"By the great Rosycrusians! it are an Ingin dressed up in a white dress, with a jaunty little hat and hull oceans o' red and blue ribbons flutterin' behind. Mr. Graves, did the devils git your darter's wardrobe when they captured her?"

"Yes, a large trunk filled with her clothing, among which was a white muslin dress," answered Mr. Graves.

"Then that red-rinded devil has got that dress on, and a hat with a long white plume is upon his apish head; a red sash is around his waist, and multitudes o' gay ribbons are flutterin' about him—some o' them tied to his hoss's mane and tail."

"My God! is my child's captivity—perhaps living death—to be thus flaunted in devilish mockery in my face?" cried Mahlon Graves, his face growing white with passion. "Men, I cannot stand it!—I will not stand it! I must do something though I die in the attempt."

He sprung to his feet and snatched up his rifle. Rattler gently laid his hand upon his shoulder, and in a calm yet sympathetic tone, said:

"Easy, my dear friend. Don't 'low yourself to become excited, for that is exactly what them demons have been tryin' to provoke in us. I'm an old borderman, and scores of times have been in difficulties from which thar seemed no escape, but by possessin' my soul in patience I allers found my way out. You see we can do nothin' ag'inst sich odds as lay in ambush for us 'round yander Dome, and you also see they are afraid to come out after us in an open field. We've got to rely on our wits, and whenever Bandy and Stonewall reports, if they ever do at all, we'll know better how to act. Just let that varmint caper and monkeyshine all he wants to, and if he dares to come within four hundred yards I'll wing him, now mind."

"Rattler, I know your advice is right, but I'll declare it is hard to submit to having insult added to injury," said Mr. Graves, in tones of bitter anguish, as he again seated himself on the ground, Rattler following his example.

The six mounted Indians returned with the one in white, but as before they drew rein at a safe distance from our friends and dismounted.

The savage in female apparel now began a performance to arouse the whites which would have done credit to a daring rider of the circus ring. He stood upon the pony's bare back and galloped swiftly back and forth across the plain. Then he would balance himself upon first one foot and then the other, his pony still going at a swinging gallop, while his dress-skirts flapped in the air and his ribbons fluttered about him like bright-winged birds. Finally he dropped himself astride his animal and went through other performances, such as riding backward, lying across his pony—all the while yelling like a demon, and ever and anon making some insulting gestures.

Our friends, however, seemed to regard his capers with stolid indifference which finally incited the cunning red-skin to bolder ventures. He galloped out in a circle as if he were going to pass around the whites, but he would go a few rods, then turn and gallop around to the other side. In this way he kept going, first to the right and then the left, each time venturing a little further, until Old Rattler was led to remark:

"Now then, that awful cute red-rind has foolishness around just about enough, and I b'lieve I'll try him a swat when he ambles back to our right. It's a big, long shot, but then Old Epidemic has a long reach, and we've got in our work that fur skads o' times."

"Where's Rambling Dan?" Zeke Rube suddenly exclaimed, looking around for the boy.

But no one answered, for no one knew. While the men had been so intent in watching the savage's performances the boy had slipped away; nor could he be seen anywhere upon the plain.

"The little scamp's crawled off into the tall grass somewheres," said Old Rattler; "but there comes that frolicsome, red-rinded ape ag'in, and now I'm goin' to try him a swat jist 'bout the time he goes to turn back."

The red-skin galloped along until almost due east of the whites and fully four hundred yards away, then, as he turned to ride back Old Rattler brought his rifle to his shoulder; but even as he did so, all saw a cloud of smoke burst from the grass behind the savage, and as the report of a pistol rung out upon the air the daring red-skin was seen to tumble from his horse, while up from the grass hard by popped the lithe figure of Rambling Dan, a smoking pistol in his hand!

CHAPTER XIV.

KIT BANDY A LA ARNOLD WINKLERIED.

STONEWALL BOB, from his seat in the Hermit's Dug-out, could only see such objects as appeared outside in line with his range of vision, or in the narrow passage leading to the cave. But with this limited view he was enabled to see no less than a dozen savages and outlaws at the entrance to the cut with Kit Bandy a prisoner, and kept in front so that his form would be a partial protection to them.

The old detective's hands were tied at his back, and his face and garb showed that he had been roughly handled by his captors; and when Stonewall saw the end of a lariat placed around the old man's neck, he mistrusted that the foe intended to march him in front of them into the cave, and thereby shield themselves from bullets from within the retreat. And in this he was correct, for soon the old detective was crowded forward, a dozen outlaws and savages forming in single file behind, and the advance upon the dug-out begun.

To prevent Bandy from dropping himself suddenly to the ground and thereby expose the outlaw following next to him, the lariat that had been put around his neck was taken to the top of the channel and tied to the center of a stout pole, which was carried by two men, one of whom walked on one side, and the other on the opposite side of the cut. The rope was kept so taut that at times Old Kit was compelled to gasp for breath or walk on tip-toe to keep from strangling.

In this way the old man was forced along the passage, the outlaws and their red allies following with drawn pistols and tomahawks.

With a revolver in each hand, and resting upon one knee, Stonewall Bob awaited the dread ordeal with a look of resolute determination upon his face. He could get glimpses of the foe behind Kit, yet no vital spot was ever exposed. By slaying Bandy he could stop the advance of the enemy, but rather than do this he resolved to take his chances with the whole band.

"Girls," the youth said, in a whisper, to his two fair companions, "take this knife, and if a chance is offered when Kit reaches the cave, sever his bonds."

"I will," said brave little Gypsy, taking the knife, "and I'll carve up an old outlaw, too, if I get a half a chance."

Keeping his eyes upon his approaching friend that was shielding his foes, a thought suddenly flashed through the young plainsman's mind and, raising his revolver, he took a steady aim and fired, and the rope that held the old man erect was cut in two with the bullet as smooth as if done with a keen-edged knife.

Oaths and exclamations from those outside, and threats and curses from those behind Bandy filled the air. The fellow next to Kit seized the end of the rope still left around the old man's neck and holding the muzzle of a revolver at his ear, threatened to shoot him down unless he walked slow and upright.

"Boy—Stonewall!" suddenly burst from Bandy's lips, "shoot me down—take no risk! I'm old and ready to die—ready to receive the Austrian spears for your salvation and—"

A vigorous jerk on the rope cut short his speech, but the next instant Stonewall's big navy rung out, a bullet tore through the air, a groan escaped Bandy's lips, he straightened up with a convulsive shudder, rattled in the throat and then dropped like a bullet to the earth at the feet of the outlaw.

Scarcely was the Red Vulture's head exposed by the fall of Bandy before the revolver of Stonewall again rung out and the villain fell forward over Bandy, shot through the brain. And then, as fast almost as one could count, the deadly weapons of the Boy Trojan began to sing out—first the right and then the left alternating with each other with almost rhythmic precision.

The line of foes melted down before the deadly fire—blocking the passage with their bodies. Terror and confusion reigned.

Some of the enemy crowded toward the cave as if drawn in that direction by some horrible fascination; but finally those in the rear broke and fled and soon the passage was clear of all but those that were down dead or dying.

Cries of mercy, oaths of vengeance, upbraiding curses and yells of dismay rose from the lips of those that lay wounded in the cut, and those that could not be seen outside. Not an outlaw or savage had ever passed over Kit Bandy's body.

Two wounded Indians and one outlaw Stonewall permitted to crawl from the cut and join their friends outside.

With terror Ruth Graves crouched in the darkest corner of the cave her white lips moving in prayer; but all the while the fearless little Gypsy, apparently fascinated by the horror of the conflict, stood near Bob clapping her hands and shouting:

"Pop away, Bob! Pop away, you brave big boy!"

From the firing of the shot that had cut the rope around Kit's neck until the last of the foe had disappeared, but a few brief moments had elapsed. The ordeal was as short as it was dead-

ly, and when it had ended Stonewall turned to the girls and said, in a calm voice:

"There, girls, we're safe again for the time being."

"But poor Old Mr. Bandy!" sobbed Ruth, "has given his life to save us!"

"Do you think so Ruth?" replied Bob, with a grim smile; "look out here, quick, and see if he is."

The maidens glanced down the passage, and to their utmost surprise and infinite joy they saw Bandy drag himself out from under a dead outlaw, spring to his feet and glide into the dug-out, calling out:

"Hullo, Bob, you and the gals in here?"

"Yes, Kit, God bless you, we are here!" exclaimed the Boy Trojan, grasping the old man by the arm and severing the cords that fettered his wrists.

"Oh, dear, old grandpa Bandy!" cried Gypsy, grasping his hand and kissing it, "oh! I'm so glad you're not killed, you dear old folks!"

"See here, Gypsy," exclaimed Kit, stooping forward, "don't waste kisses onto that old hand."

Before the words were scarcely out of his mouth, the maiden, in her childish joy, threw her arms about the old man's neck and kissed his hard, wrinkled cheek.

"There, by heavens!" the old fellow exclaimed, "that serves me right, gal, and lifts my old heart up with joy. But how glad I am to meet you three again."

"I see you have been in rough hands since we parted last night, Kit?"

"Yes, I should say so," replied the old detective, rubbing his hands together to restore the circulation that his bonds had impeded; "I failed to get around last night as I agreed to; but it war my own fault and not the foe's so much that I didn't. After leadin' the varmints off your trail I kept dodgin' around in the bushes at the foot o' the hill till I come to whar some ponies war tied, and I concluded I'd take a few o' them fur us to ride. If I'd been content with two I'd got away all right, but in tryin' to steal four I got nabbed, and, oh! ram'shorn o' Joshua! how the Satonians did thump me around. But, boy, you are a daisy pistol-shot. The way you cut that rope that held me up so majestic-like war a superb prize shot; and then the way you caught on when I invited death runs you up to the head o' your class in mind-readin'. But, say, didn't I tumble nicely, though? didn't I do the convulsive act tragically? Didn't I git off that death-rattle in mosaic style? didn't I—"

"Gracious!" exclaimed Gypsy, "ar'n't you going to stop for breath? You'll smother if you don't."

Bob laughed outright at the child's remark, nor could Ruth repress a smile.

"Gal," said Old Kit, himself amused at Gypsy's heedless words, "you're bad as Old Tom Rattler to fire into me. But speakin' o' Rattler: don't I wish he could 'a' see'd me marchin' up thar a livin' breastwork for them varmints, and see how nicely I threw myself on the Austrian spears, so to speak, like that brave Switzer we read about?"

"Did you learn how those fellows fared that visited our camp up the river?" Bob asked.

"They come back a-cussin' and pawin' the air, bringin' two o' their crowd in blankets, and several with holes in their systems that made 'em sick. I guess Rattler and his chums give 'em an informal reception."

"What had Jim Noel to say to you?"

"Not very much, for that pagoda you 'rected on his right cheek and Hindu temple on t'other continued to grow, and at last accounts his peepers war closed and bombardments o' cold water outwardly, and whisky inwardly, war being made to demolish the pagoda and temple. Jim's in the condition o' snake in dog-days—Jim's blind."

"And I realize that we're in no enviable position," said Stonewall Bob.

"I'd rather be here than out in that ditch whar them five or six Ingins and pirates are," said Kit.

"But we have no food; if we had we could stand a long siege, having water right at hand, but these girls must have something to eat."

"Do not worry about that, Robert," said Ruth; "I could not eat a bite if we had food in plenty."

"As soon as night comes, I'll git out here and hunt the other boys up," said Bandy. "They'll not leave till they hear from us. Neither do I think our enemies 'll leave till they have to. They'll try to freeze you out—not me, for you know I'm dead. They'd made up their minds to shoot me, and war even making arrangements for the fun when a feller arriv' with the information that you'd been tracked to the old Hermit's Dug-out, and after they'd made known the dangers in approachin' the cave through the ditch, they concluded to use me as a breastwork secin' as how I war a great, brawny-boned feller. But I proved a boomerang to them, the miserable scamps."

"It's a wonder you got out without some serious injury, at least," said Stonewall.

"A man that's see'd the hardships o' married life—passed thro' as many domestic cyclones as I have, are not to be downed by common—"

A low growl and a cry from Gypsy cut short the old man's words. Turning, all saw emerge

from a hole in the darkest corner of the dug-out a small black bear which, rearing upon its haunches, looked from one to the other of the intruders in its retreat as if to determine with which of the four it should begin a contest for the right of possession to the dug-out!

CHAPTER XV.

OUR FRIENDS ON THE WING AGAIN.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Rattler, as he saw the Boy Mountaineer rise up from the grass near the fallen red-skin, "that boy, Rambling Dan, has killed the savage! But now, men, mount and ride for the lad, for yander comes them other red-rinds to avenge their friend's death."

Springing into their saddles the five men rode swiftly toward the boy, who, seeing his danger, retreated rapidly toward his friends. This soon brought them all together again, and that, too, in ample time for the men to dismount and prepare to meet the savages.

Rambling Dan, although elated with his exploit, was perfectly cool and self-possessed, and was the first to raise his rifle and fire upon the advancing foe, tumbling the foremost red-skin from his saddle. His shot was succeeded by the boom of Rattler's "Epidemic," and this in turn by the rifles of the other four. Two more red-skins and a horse went down, and the survivors, without firing a shot, wheeled their ponies and fled in terror and dismay. But before they had got beyond range of Old Rattler's Henry, another of the party paid with his life the penalty of his rashness—the shot being made at such a long distance that it called forth words of surprise and admiration from the lips of the old marksman's friends.

"That was a bully old accident, Rattler," exclaimed Rambling Dan, his boyish face aglow with delight.

"Sugar! that war jist a meymum shot, you scamp," replied Rattler; "and if we hadn't run out o' Ingins I'd show you some shootin' with frills and trimmin's that'd take your breath away from you. But say, lad, do you know I've a notion to pound you?"

"Why, what's the matter now?"

"I'd ax that wouldn't I? What'd you sneak off through the grass fur like a weasel and cheat me outen that frolicsome, kittery Ingini? But then I'll forgive you this time, for you done the job up so superb that my old heart melts with pride. Boy, I see you are a meek-eyed daffodil—a lily-lipped hummer; but s'pose we all go over and look at that jolly Ingini circus-ride?"

To this all consented, and they moved to where the dead savage lay dressed in his robe of white. He was lying upon his side just as he fell from his pony. The bosom of the white dress was crimson with blood. The lady's hat on his head was crushed and broken. Around his neck was a gold chain to which was attached an old-fashioned locket.

"They are all my daughter's effects," Mr. Graves said, almost breaking down with emotion.

Rattler took the crushed hat from the dead warrior's head and handed it to Mr. Graves, who removed the ribbons, and rolling them up, put them in his pocket.

Zeke Ruble removed the chain and locket, and placing them in the grieving father's hand, said:

"You recognize that, of course?"

"Yes, it contains the picture of Ruth's dead mother—see?" and he handed the opened locket back to the hunter.

Ruble looked upon the fair face of the woman therein, and his face instantly grew white and his hands began to tremble. No one noticed his emotions except Old Rattler.

Finally Ruble asked:

"Is that the picture of your wife?"

"As I said, it is Ruth's mother," replied Graves, in a tone that required no keenness of perception to see was evasive.

Ruble gazed at the picture a few moments, then turned the locket over and over and looked at it like one in mental reflection.

"Pardon me," he suddenly remarked, passing the locket back to Graves, and then as he turned away the observing Rattler caught the glimmer of a mist in his eyes.

"By Rosycrusian!" thought Old Rattler, "what does this mean? That man Graves evaded a question o' Ruble, and I know that pictur' is somethin' or rather to Zeke. Sugar! I wish Old Kit Bandy war here to note what I have and foot up facts and see what he can make o' it. But my notion that thar's somethin' queer 'bout Ruble's not weakened a bit. He's no fool, that I'm sure of, and the way he looks at a feller sometimes makes him feel as though he war at the Bar o' Judgment, and—"

The old hunter's musings were here interrupted by Rambling Dan, who suddenly exclaimed:

"Great vipers! look yonder, folks! thar comes Ingins enuff for Mr. Rattler, I guess."

Out from the cover of the bushes that skirted the base of the Hermit Dome, no less than fifty horsemen appeared riding at a furious speed.

"Indians, with a sprinkling o' Red Vultures," said One-Armed Phil, looking through his spy-glass.

"A sprinklin' o' outlaws and a shower o' In-

gins make a pretty big deluge for we six prairie-dolphins," said Rattler; "and now I think it are 'bout time fur us to be waltzin' across the plain in s'arch o' some more salubrious atmosphere. Come, boys, to saddle."

In a moment all were in their saddles, when Old Rattler led the way across the valley in a southwesterly course.

"We'll keep in a direction that leads toward water," said the borderman, "fur if we are forced to fight we don't want to make a stand till we reach water. But jist listen to ther hyenas howl! They are tryin' to paralyze us with terror. They don't know that they're bein' led down to death even now. If they'll foller us twenty miles, I'll contract to down one for every mile. Shoot and run are my tactics—keep the varmints mad so's they'll foller up. But it takes a long-ranged gun, a good marksman and a fleet boss to do the shoot-and-run trick, but then that combination are persessed by the Red River Epidemic. And now I'm goin' to show you how it's did. You fellers keep straight ahead toward that rise in the plain 'way yander and I'll overtake ye, and after a while mebbey things'll git into shape so's we can all git in a lick."

As he spoke he drew up on his rein and soon fell behind, and after a while he stopped entirely, dismounted and appeared to busy himself about his saddle-girth.

The foe coming on at a breakneck speed were strung out over half a mile—those on the fleetest horses taking the lead. Rattler waited until the foremost were within two hundred yards of him, then he quickly threw his rifle across his saddle and fired, and, without stopping to note the result of his shot, he vaulted into his saddle and dashed on after his friends. As he did so he glanced back over his shoulder, and a horse running riderless on the plain told how true his shot had been.

As the old borderman and Indian-fighter had anticipated, the red-skins were infuriated by the death of their friend, and urged on their horses with heel and lash, shrieking like demons possessed.

"Hurrah for Rattler!" shouted Rambling Dan; "he done that nice as a new ribbon."

"He's a daring, dashing old man," said Mahlon Graves; "but if his horse should slip or stumble his fate would be sealed in a few minutes."

"Very true, Mr. Graves," added Zeke Ruble, "but Rattler knows his horse, and is emboldened by a lifetime of successful adventure."

"But one thing that makes him so successful in the shoot-and-run game is his long-ranged gun," said Graves, "and some day he'll run against a foe with one just as good."

In the mean time the pursuit continued. Ten miles were soon passed over and for half that distance back the foe were strung along. Not more than one-fourth of the number that had started out on the chase were now at the front, and one by one these kept dropping out by the sheer exhaustion of their horses, or the deadly bullets of Old Rattler, until but half a dozen remained. As soon as their force had been thus diminished the old borderman called out to his friends:

"Say, boys, s'pose we change the programme and chase them awhile now. That's only six o' the varmints arter us now, and I won't run from six red-rinds. Pull up, boys, and let's swat 'em."

They drew rein and prepared to meet the foe, but the latter, seeing their intentions, drew up also, and as soon as the whites advanced toward them they turned and retreated—the pursuers became the pursued. After riding a few miles, however, they came up with some of their friends that had dropped out of the race, and as they continued the retreat their force augmented from the stragglers of the pursuit.

At length the red-skins and outlaws attempted to make another stand, but the terrible long-ranged gun of Rattler opened upon them, and they were compelled, a score strong, to gallop on to keep out of reach of the one deadly rifle-man.

Rattler and his friends, however, did not press them hard, for they had no desire for a conflict at close quarters, but they resolved that when the foe reached the Hermit Dome they would not be far away. Nor were they, for when the savages had struggled back to the river Rattler and his friends were back in their position as "prairie dolphins."

"Now," said the old Indian-fighter, as he threw himself upon the grassy earth, "how much have the infernal fools gained outen their grand sallies? Now, it 'pears to me that they're out some six or ten red-rinds, while here we tempestuous, sportive dolphins lay frolickin' in the sunshine o' the prairie ocean. But, say, it seems to me it are time to dine, boys, and I'll proceed to spread ther table on the ground."

Dried meats and drier bread, and water with which each one was supplied in canteens, made up their menu, but frugal as it was it satisfied their appetites.

The enemy made no further demonstrations during the remainder of that day, but Rattler was satisfied that they were only waiting for night to renew their operations; and while all parties were thus inactive most of our friends

laid down on the plain and took a nap while others kept watch.

As soon as it began to grow dark, Rattler said:

"Now, boys, we'll remain here till night sets in, then we'll change our position so that the Vultures and red-rinds can't ride straight down to us 'long the trail they made to-day paddin' back and for'ard tryin' to disturb we dolphins. But narry saddle nor bridle must be removed from a boss this night, nor must a man let go o' his rein. We must be ready to jump aboard in an instant. And another thing: some one will have to go back to our old camp and see if Kit and Stonewall have reported there."

"I will gladly perform that duty," Ruble said, "for I would rather be on the move than standing idle here."

And matters being thus arranged, the party awaited the coming of night.

CHAPTER XVI.

STONEWALL BOB'S ADVENTURE.

We left our friends, Kit Bandy, Stonewall Bob and the two maidens in the Hermit Dug-out confronted by a new danger in the sudden appearance of a bear from a hole in the darkest corner of the cave.

As for Stonewall Bob, he regarded the animal with no more apparent concern than if it were a coyote, and drawing his big revolver he sent a bullet crashing through its brain. With a roar of pain, the beast fell back, and after a few minutes' spasmodic struggling, yielded up the ghost.

"Thar, by the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, "if we'd some fuel we'd have a bar-roast and live like kings and queens o' the olden time when the enemy striv' in vain to cross the moat, scale the portcullis and storm the castle walls, ah!"

"You're getting quite romantic, Bandy," said Stonewall, as he replaced a cartridge in his revolver; "but then we'll not starve even if we have to eat raw bear-meat like fugitives in a dug-out while surrounded by a horde of wild savages and white outlaws."

"That's intended for sarkasm, I see, Bobby," said Kit, "but seein' I are a married man sich little anicjotes don't make me blush; but jokin' aside, boy, the chances o' gittin' outen here are not layin' 'round thick as dead Trojans in that cut out there."

"I'll get out of here some time to-night," declared Stonewall Bob. "Of course I'll not attempt it until the foe has exhausted all his expedients to get into this dug-out, for I am sure he will try every way to capture us under the friendly cover of darkness."

"No doubt but they'll watch this place like fourteen cats watchin' one mouse-hole," replied Bandy.

In view of all these facts the party was anxious for, and yet dreaded, the coming of night. The hours wore by slowly, and when at length the shadows of night began to gather, misgivings of fear began to pervade the breast of the besieged maidens. They intuitively crept closer together and clasped their arms about each other's form as if in this closer companionship there was a sense of greater security.

Vigilant as the fabled Argus, Stonewall Bob sat at the entrance to the cut with eye and ear on the alert. The night was exceedingly dark outside, and in the cave and the passage leading thereto darkness could not be blacker.

Nothing, whatever, of the Indians could be heard, but the Boy Trojan was too well versed in Indian cunning not to know that the wily foe's presence was not always attended with noisy demonstrations.

The dead outlaws and Indians still lay in the cut, the water from the spring in the cave creeping noiselessly under their bodies, and in view of the fact that Stonewall had placed his last cartridge in his revolver, and that they were likely to be sorely pressed for ammunition with which to defend themselves, Old Kit concluded to creep out into the passage and secure the revolvers, knives, tomahawks and ammunition that he had seen during the day on the bodies of the dead. He had but little fears of harm in so doing, for he reasoned that even if the foe should hear him approaching they would think him on his way out to escape and await his coming in silence at the end of the cut. Nevertheless, he observed all possible silence, and as he crept away even Stonewall could scarcely detect a sound of his stealthy movements.

Some distance had Kit Bandy come to work in the darkness of night that he was enabled to do so with much of the mechanical precision of a blind man, his sense of hearing and touch taking the place of sight; and so he was not gone over five minutes, returning with three revolvers, four tomahawks, and no less than seven long-bladed and murder-looking knives.

During the day the two men had discussed the probable plans the foe would resort to in order to reach the dug-out. Bob had been of the opinion that a sudden dash would be attempted, and to stand against the onrush of such a movement the possession of the enemies' knives suggested an expedient to Old Kit, and that was to construct a kind of an *abat* of the weapons. So selecting four of the longest and sharpest of

the blades he stole back into the passage. About half-way down the cave he stopped, and rising to his feet he felt the walls of the cut until he had found a spot suitable for his purpose when, with a fifth knife, he bored a hole in the hard, clayey earth about four feet from the ground. Into this hole he inserted the haft of one of the knives, the hole being so slanted as to incline the point of the weapon toward the entrance to the passage. In the wall on the opposite side another knife was planted in the same position as the first, and two feet below these two more were fixed. The space left between these points was not over a foot, and it would be impossible for a person, walking erect, or upon hands and knees at a fair gait, to escape receiving the deadly points in his breast, and in such a manner as to stop further advance toward the cave.

With a feeling of greater security Bandy returned to his friends and announced the successful construction of his *abat* of knives.

"Your bump of self-preservation is well developed, isn't it, Kit?" observed Stonewall, in a pleasant voice.

"I'll confess it is, lad," replied Kit; "and let me tell you that two-thirds precaution and one-third fight is the best recipe I know of for a border detective or scout to compound and take twenty-four times a day if he'd add to his longevity and happiness."

"How about a little Musket-Mouth deception and fraud?" asked Bob, the darkness concealing the smile upon his face.

"A little o' that added for to give the other a body sometimes helps another feller with a broken head," was Kit's response.

"I catch on, Kit, like a burr," replied Bob, as his mind reverted to the blow Jim Noel had given him, and from which he was still suffering no little pain.

Thus the fugitives passed the hours pleasantly as possible under the circumstances.

Along toward midnight they were suddenly startled by a noise as if of something dropping in the passage. They listened, and upon hearing the sound repeated knew the foe were at work. They were dropping pebbles into the passage from above for the purpose, no doubt, of testing the vigilance of the besieged.

Satisfied that the sounds were not made by any one in the passage, Stonewall remained perfectly quiet, with his finger on the trigger of his revolver.

Fully another hour went by, when suddenly the Boy Trojan detected the sound of footsteps outside the cut, and almost at the same moment of this discovery the night was made hideous with unearthly yells and the firing of guns and pistols on the hillside above the passage. But the very instant the sounds burst forth the quick brain of Old Kit saw the object in view, and said to Bob:

"That hell-howlin', Bob, is to drown the noise o' others advancin' through the passage!"

"Yes, they're comin' now!" exclaimed Bob, in a whisper, but scarcely had he spoken when a piercing shriek of agony burst from the cut and was succeeded by gasping moans, the shuffling of feet and low muttered curses.

"By the horn o' old Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy, "an outlaw's impaled hisself on them knives! The critter's body blocks the passage so's the others can't advance—don't shoot, boy, and I'll take advantage o' the confusion to skip out o' here when the varmints fall back and go for help."

"No, Bandy," said Stonewall, "you can defend here as well as I, and I can go better than you—I'm young and supple and can run the gantlet as easy as you—here, take one of my revolvers."

Kit saw that the tone in which Bob spoke would admit of no protest, and so he quietly took the weapon, merely adding:

"Have it your way, Bob. I'll die by the guns."

The wildest confusion reigned on the hillside along the edges of the cut—so clamorous, indeed, was the noise that those making it seemed not to hear the voices of those in the cut. But Stonewall and Kit were more interested in those in the passage than those above, and they listened intently to their movements. They heard the gasping moans of one, and the curses of others that could not comprehend the cause of the blockade.

With a parting word to Kit and the maidens, Stonewall Bob glided into the passage, his right hand, in which he clutched his revolver, extended before him. He groped his way along until the muzzle of the weapon came in contact with an obstruction which proved to be the body of a man that was standing in the passage. Low, rattling moans were issuing from his lips while the crowd behind were endeavoring to shove him forward.

Stonewall saw in an instant that the wretch was impaled upon Kit's knife-points and could not advance nor could he retreat for those behind. The fellow was so near gone that in response to a question from behind him he could not answer, but Bob saw his opportunity, and placing his head near that of the dying outlaw, he said—imitating the man's broken voice:

"God! I'm impaled!—dyin'!—flee, they're comin'! Oh—gl—ll!"

"Fall back there! fall back!" instantly shouted the outlaw next to the impaled man, frantic with terror; "the cut's barricaded and Boker's stabbed to death!"

This startling news was communicated from one to the other of the attacking party, and instantly all became seized with terror and a panic ensued. A general scramble for life followed, and even yet those on the hillside were ignorant of what had happened and were howling away like demons.

Stonewall placed his hand against the breast of the impaled outlaw and shoved his body back. It fell with a dull crash to the earth. With his revolver the Boy Trojan felt for the knives in the wall. He found the two lower ones and removed them, but the others had been withdrawn from the wall when the outlaw fell back, the knives remaining in his breast. The way thus cleared for his own passage, he walked over the dead bodies that lay strewn along the cut and followed along at the very heels of the panic-stricken foe. As he emerged from the passage the young plainsman could discern the shadowy outlines of those before him, and as they rushed madly into the deeper shadows of the bushes and trees he followed them, and soon found himself in their very midst, jostled on every side by the excited wretches. But while the youth was quite eager and anxious for other company, he did not act hastily nor precipitately in getting away, through fear that his actions might lead to detection. But unmolested or discovered he finally made his way from the midst of his foes, the very boldness of his adventure disarming the enemy; and before those that were doing such demoniac yelling on the hillside could be made to understand the situation—the failure of the assault on the dug-out and the death of Boker—the Boy Trojan was several rods away, moving rapidly up the river.

But Stonewall was destined to meet with another adventure before getting clear of the foe. He had not gone more than forty rods when, emerging from a dense clump of bushes, he was startled at sight of a great bonfire before him. It lit up the valley from the bluffs to the river, and to make good his escape he must cross this field of light. He saw two persons seated near the fire—an Indian and a white man. Both appeared to be wounded, for their heads were bandaged and one arm of the Indian was in a sling. A second glance at the white man and Bob recognized him as his old enemy, Jim Noel, who was evidently beginning to see the light of day again, yet unable to take part in the proceedings at the fateful dug-out.

Just beyond the two men Bob saw a number of horses hitched, saddled and bridled, and the youth at once made up his mind that he should ride. But he had no hope of eluding discovery by the Indian and Noel, and he at once decided how he would dispose of them from offering him violence at least, though he hardly expected he could dispose of them in time to prevent them giving an alarm. But once on the back of a horse he would feel no uneasiness.

With the quickness of a lion he bounded forward straight at the outlaw who was nearest to him and sat face toward him. The villain saw him the moment he emerged from the shadows, but before he could even rise to his feet Stonewall swept past him, giving him a brushing kick in the stomach that doubled him up breathless several feet beyond, and scarcely lacking his speed the Young Trojan dashed at the Indian, who had succeeded in getting upon his feet, and gave him a stunning rap on the head with his revolver that dropped him senseless to the earth. Another bound carried the daring youth to the side of a horse which he quickly untied and mounted; then turning its head up the river he rode leisurely away through the timber until he reached open ground, when he urged the animal forward at a sweeping gallop.

When about a mile away he drew rein and listened, but he heard no sound from the direction of the enemies' quarters to indicate that his escape had been discovered, and with a grim smile of triumph upon his noble face, the Boy Trojan rode on.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WRONGED WIFE.

As soon as darkness had set in Zeke Ruble mounted his horse and started for the old camp on the Moreau, taking with him the horses of Kit Bandy and Stonewall Bob, whom he hoped to find in waiting for him.

When about forty rods from the old rendezvous he dismounted, and hitching the horses advanced on foot. He was afraid that others than friends might be around, and so resolved to run no risks.

While moving along through the timber he suddenly discovered a light some distance before him. Hoping that it might be from the campfire of the two friends he sought, he moved on. He soon got close enough to the fire to see that it was burning on the very spot where their campfire had burned the night before, but to his surprise and disappointment he saw neither of his friends in its light, but a female—a woman!

Instantly it flashed through the hunter's mind

that this might be another Indian trick to entrap him, and he resolved to act accordingly, but catching a glimpse of the woman's face, he saw that she was white. To him, however she was an entire stranger, and that a woman was actually there before him he could scarcely believe yet. So he crept still closer and finally came in sight of an old "weather-beaten" looking horse hitched within the radius of light. Hard by he saw a side-saddle, an old umbrella, and a bundle of something, and a green baize sachel—all of which convinced him that there was no deception in the character before him. But what a woman could be doing there alone, and whether she was a friend or foe, Ruble could not tell, but he resolved to know, and straightway walked into the camp.

The woman was seated upon a log gazing into the fire as if in mental reflection, but at the sound of the hunter's footsteps she quickly looked up—not in fear, but surprise.

Ruble was the first to speak, addressing her just as their eyes met with the familiar salutation:

"Hullo! good-evening, stranger!"

"Deary me, who be you?" the woman replied, in an unmistakable female voice, as she rose to her feet and tipped back the flaring old "scoop" that was doing duty as a bonnet.

Ruble in surprise and astonishment saw that she was an elderly woman with a care-worn and withered face, a keen, penetrating eye, a sharp chin, and a long, straight nose. Her iron-gray hair was combed down upon her forehead and for want of recent care was beginning to fluff up and hang somewhat scraggy. Around her shoulders was an old faded shawl. Her dress was of some dark material and quite plain in style.

"I'm Zeke Ruble," the hunter said, in answer to her question, "and you need have no fears, for seeing you are a woman, I am your friend. But now, may I inquire your name?"

"To be sure you can," replied the woman, rather sharply; "my name is Sabina Bandy, and I'm the lawfully-wedded consort of Kit Bandy—villain, monster, and old upas-tree to woman's heart that he is!"

"Great temple of Solomon!" exclaimed Ruble, astounded by the claim she made upon and the charges she preferred against the old detective. "I am astonished. Kit spoke of his being a married man, but I thought he was only jesting—"

"The remorseless Israelite that he is!" the woman broke in, apparently enraged by Ruble's information; "he spoke of bein' married, did he? No doubt he jested 'bout it, for the sacrilegious brigand jests at all things sacred. But, please the merciful Father! I'll not jest with him if ever I lay them hands upon him. I'll avenge the wrongs he has done me by winnin' my childish heart and then desertin' my bed and board when I begun to fade. Man—stranger!" and she straightened up with a tragic look upon her face and a gleam in her eyes, "be you saint or sinner, Jew or Gentile, hunter or outlaw, your heart 'd melt down with pity if I war to tell you of all that old heart-crusher's iniquity. But I will spare you—the story's long as the Moral law whose penalties are gradually encirclin' the life of Christopher C. Bandy unbeknownst to him. For weary months I've been on his trail, and here had I hoped to swoop down upon him like the Assyrian and—"

"Then you think your recreant husband's in this neighborhood?" said Ruble.

"Think? think?" she replied, with a look of slight contempt, "I don't think anything 'bout it, but I know it, else I wouldn't 'a' been here."

"Well, madam, I have no desire to tell you else than the truth," said Zeke; "I came here myself to meet your husband, Mr. Bandy, and as he is not here, I'm afraid he's in trouble."

"Another woman!" exclaimed Sabina, fiercely.

"No, Ingins and outlaws," replied Ruble, scarcely able to repress a smile, "and I am truly afraid this fire will bring like troubles upon you."

"I'm afraid of no Ingins or outlaw that ever hopped on God's green earth! I'm no young chicken-heart to faint at the sight of a man or skeer like a deer at sight of an Ingins. A cruel fate named Christopher C. Bandy has made me a fearless, stony-hearted woman, and once I was as timid as a fawn and tender-hearted as a mother-dove. Oh! the wickedness— But, great adorable mercy! who's that?—old Goliath tall!"

This sudden change in the woman's words and tone was occasioned by the appearance of a third person from the shadows. Ruble turned quickly, and to his infinite joy found himself face to face with Stonewall Bob.

"God bless you, boy!" the man cried, grasping the Boy Trojan's hand, "I am rejoiced to meet you again, for we'd begun to think you were in trouble."

"And you were right in so thinking, Zeke," replied Stonewall. "but where are the other boys?"

"Out on the plain awaiting your coming along with a Mr. Mahlon Graves and two others."

"Mr. Graves! Thank God he lives!" exclaimed the young Trojan; "but has he told you of his

daughter's capture by the outlaws and Indians?"

"Yes, Bob, and also the capture of the child, Wild Gypsy; but what of them, Stonewall?"

"They are besieged in a dug-out below the Hermit Dome. I left them with Old Kit not an hour ago."

"This woman," said Ruble, turning and introducing him to Sabina, "is Kit Bandy's wife—"

"Yes," Sabina smoothly glided in, "I'm the lawfully-wedded wife of Christopher Columbus Bandy, and as you see, young man, a wreck of my former self and beauty, and that ongrateful man is the cause of it all."

Stonewall was astounded by this revelation, and at first he was disposed, out of the manliness of his gallant heart, to sympathize with the wronged wife, however much he admired the brave and inimitable Old Kit Bandy, but as the woman kept on with her vindictive language and vituperations, he made up his mind that perhaps the old detective was not possessed of the philosophical patience and forbearance of a Socrates to submit to the torments of a Xantippe.

"I can assure you, madam," the young plainsman finally said, "that your husband is not far away. I left him in a cave or dug-out with two young ladies—"

"Great and adorable mercy!" shrieked Sabina, "you left him with two girls? Man, do you know that the old, oily-tongued flirt will make love to both of them girls and win their affections, as he won mine, before the mornin' sun kisses the mountain heights?"

"I think he has something else to do than make love to the girls," replied Bob, a faint smile upon his face, "for he's surrounded by Indians and outlaws and may be a dead man even by this time."

"The presence o' Gabriel with his horn to his lips wouldn't prevent him flirtin' with a girl," declared Sabina, "even though he knew the first toot o' the trump would send her up and him down. No, young giant, I know Kit Bandy better'n you know the way to heaven, and I'm goin' to break up that little tête-à-tête in that cave."

As she concluded she took up her saddle and flung it on her horse and fastened it. Then she packed up her traps, and, despite the protestations, warnings and coaxings of the two borderers, she mounted and rode away down the river.

"Well, I'll be everlastingly confused!" exclaimed Stonewall Bob; "that beats anything in the strong-minded-woman line that I have ever met in my short experience. She's a darned old fool, Ruble!"

"She's an oddity and an enigma, Bob," Ruble replied; "but we have no time to discuss that now, for I do not deem it safe to tarry here. My horse and yours are hitched out here in the woods and we had better be getting away from here."

To this Stonewall assented, and in a few minutes they were in their saddles, riding across the valley. As they proceeded along Ruble briefly narrated the adventures with which he and his party had met since the night before, and Stonewall in turn recounted the perils through which he, Kit and the two maidens had passed.

Finally they reached their friends on the plain. Stonewall was received with demonstrations of joy, and his meeting with Mahlon Graves was attended with no little emotion on the part of each.

In a few words as possible the Boy Trojan told the story of his and Kit's adventures in rescuing the maidens and of the situation that he had left the old detective and the girls in.

"Then we'll have some robust fightin' to do afore we git to that cave," observed Rattler, when Bob had finished his story.

"Indeed we will, Rattler," replied Stonewall.

"Wal, we're the kidneys that can do that bumfustic. We've had no fightin' to speak of for several hours. And so Old Kit's well and with the gals? The darlin' old buccaneer! but oh! if that old wife o' his gits her peepers on his majestic form he'll wilt like a cabbage-head in a hot wind. But, boys, it begins to look to me now that afore we get to the Red Vultures' roost and clap the irons on our man, John Rossgrrove, we'll earn the reward offered."

"The more outlaws we kill down here on open ground the less we'll have to fight in the hills," said Zeke Ruble.

"Very true, Zeke, and it might be sich a thing we'd run 'g'inst our man out here with ther rest o' the flock."

"No such good luck, if it be so as they say that he never takes to the saddle; but, be that as it may, our first duty is plain enough, and that is—"

"The rescue o' Old Kit and the girls," said Rattler; "and the sooner we are movin' the better it'll be for us and for them. Stonewall Robert, since you know where the dug-out is located, the lay o' the land thereabouts, and the posish o' the enemy it'll devolve upon you to lead the way and plan the attack on the varmints. To this, if thar be any objection, let the man shout it out now."

But there were no objections, and Stonewall

Bob accepted the trust with a full sense of the responsibility resting upon him. The fair face of Ruth Graves was ever before him, and the kind words she uttered when fastening upon his breast that badge of honor, were incentives that filled his young heart with heroic pride and fired his soul with manly courage.

In a few minutes more the party was on its way in the direction of "The Hermit Dug-out."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WROTHY ROBBERS AND AN EMPTY CAGE.

THE outlaws and red-skins had never dreamed but that Old Kit Bandy had been slain in the passage leading into the dug-out, and thus believing, they supposed they had but a single foe to contend with, and that one Stonewall Bob. However, bitter experience had taught them that the Boy Trojan occupied an almost impregnable defense that he was able to hold single-handed as long as his ammunition lasted and starvation did not force him to capitulate.

Captain Vulture was a man considered fertile in expedients, and the midnight attack which had resulted in Stonewall's escape was a scheme of his fruitful, strategic mind; but a greater blunder could not have been conceived by the outlaw, although Old Kit's *abatias* of knife-points could hardly have been anticipated by any one. But the stupidity of the whole affair was the continued howling and firing of the mob posted on the hillside. Their din was intended to conceal the movements of the attacking party, but it proved the most advantageous to the defenders. As nothing could be seen in the pitchy darkness, nor nothing heard but the infernal noise on the hillside, it was several moments after the ignominious retreat from the cut before the defeated party could make their friends understand the situation and stop the howling. When they did, however, and all learned that the leader of the assailants had been caught and impaled upon some kind of weapons in the dark passage, a feeling of no little regret was manifested, for the outlaw was a favorite among his friends, both red and white. Captain Vulture was visibly affected, for the man was one of his most faithful and daring followers.

"By the gods!" he exclaimed, "if things continue this way much longer, the Red Vultures will all be food for coyotes."

"Our enemies alers gits the advantage o' us," said an old, repulsive-looking villain, called Buzzard Bill, who was inclined to find fault.

"They'll never get the advantage of you," said the villain Bramble, who figured so conspicuously with Jim Noel in our friends' camp the night before, "unless they should attack us in the rear, some time, where you are always to be found."

"Bram, yer don't want ter knife me with yer tongue," replied Buzzard Bill, "for yer know I can fight when I have to. I'm for stayin' right here—never givin' up till that giant, Stonewall Bob, are stretched like old Goliath, dead on their plain."

"I want to stay till I git one shot at him," said another, "and then he'll trouble us no more. But we shouldn't feel so bad toward him, seein' he killed off Old Bandy."

"That war nothing in his favor, for we could have 'slew'd' Bandy jist as easy as he did," said Bramble; "but then, we'll stay right here till purgatory freezes over but what we'll have them girls—the oldest one, at any rate."

Thus the defeated villains conversed for some time, within three rods of the entrance to the dug-out. They were excited and noisy, and at times two or three were talking at once. Various and novel were the many plans suggested by the outlaws for the capture or death of the Boy Trojan, but in the face of two bloody defeats, none of them were indorsed by Captain Vulture. It was rather exasperating to the outlaw chief to be held at bay by a single man when he was backed by no less than three-score. His loss had already been so great that he was afraid his red allies would become discouraged and withdraw from the contest, and it taxed his energies to keep up their spirits in the face of repeated disasters.

In the midst of their disorderly conference a groan was heard to come from the direction of their bivouac. Silence was enjoined and all listened, when to their ears came the startling appeal:

"Here, men! come quick, for God's sake!"

It was the voice of Jim Noel.

Like a flock of sheep outlaws and Indians rushed away in a body toward the camp.

They soon reached the field of light and were startled to see the wounded Indian they had left there a short time before lying prostrate upon the earth to all appearance dead, while Jim Noel lay rolling on the earth, his hands clasped upon his stomach, cursing and groaning in terrible agony.

"Great heavens, Jim! what's the matter?" exclaimed Bramble.

"I'm dyin'—my whole paunch 's kicked off—"

"Who did it, man! speak!" roared Bramble.

"Stonewall Bob, of course!" groaned the unlucky Jim.

"Man, what do you mean?" thundered Captain Vulture.

"My God!" groaned Noel, "it's queer you

don't know that Stonewall Bob's at large. He just passed through here like a hurricane and kicked in my whole stomach and battered down the Sioux—that's what I mean."

Captain Vulture's face grew black with speechless fury. Jack Bramble in his rage fairly danced a hornpipe. The excited red-skins, infuriated by the death of another of their friends, lunged away in pursuit of the destroyer.

A horse was found missing, and this discovery led to the belief that the Boy Trojan had escaped with the girls.

"But how or when could they have escaped?" asked Bramble.

"I presume," said Buzzard Bill, and his presumption was in a measure correct, "that the Boy Trojan and the gals folloed out at the heels o' our panic-stricken braves and in their darkness waltzed off while we war yelpin' and tearin' our lungs out up on ther hillside. A dandy set o' vultures we are, Bramble—we'd better go to roost, and to-morrow go home and clip our wings, and be content ter live on bugs and mice."

"To-morrow we will make a forward movement," declared Captain Vulture, "and end this business one way or the other. We'd better all die trying to do something than all be killed devilin' 'round here the way we have been with half a dozen old men and one big boy."

"Suppose we go and examine that dug-out?" said Bramble.

"Not by a blanked sight!" retorted the outlaw chief, "for there may be a torpedo or two in there yet. I don't want to die to-night; but if you want to go in I'll see you decently buried, provided we can get possession of the remains."

"Thank you, captain," responded Bramble; "but I don't propose to die either, for I intend to enjoy the society of that handsome Miss Graves, and die an old millionaire."

"Confound the girls!" suddenly put in Jim Noel, who had got the kinks out of himself; "they've proved a curse to us already, and are now out of our grasp, and I'd say let 'em go if it wer'n't that I want double revenge on that Stonewall Bob. Another welt from him and I, James Noel, will be demolished. It's darned queer he don't bat some one else once in a while. But I say rub out that gang of bloodhounds that's after us, even if we have to lose the gals in doing so."

"We tried and have been a-trying to erase them," said Bramble, facetiously, "but they're like blood-stains—hard to wash out. Just to-day we started out to demolish them, and after several hours' racing and chasing we returned several men short, with every bloodhound at our very heels. Up to date we're out no less than ten or twelve Vultures—half of our band—and a score of red-skins, and what have we got? Old Kit Bandy is all, and even he we didn't kill."

"Haven't I got a mashed face and my kidneys kicked out?" asked Jim Noel; "what you talkin' about?"

"You've been very fortunate, Jim, in that respect," answered Captain Vulture, "but I don't envy you your possessions. But hereafter we will kill everything on sight. If we had done that last night instead of allowing Musket-Mouth and Slickchops to ring in a cold deck on us, we would have had none of this trouble."

And thus the outlaws talked over and bewailed their bad luck until they were suddenly startled by the sound of voices approaching from up the river. They were excited voices, and when the outlaws recognized them as those of their friends, they were led to believe that the Boy Trojan had been captured and their joy knew no bounds. But this was only a delusion that was dispelled when, a few moments later, Sabina Bandy rode into the field of light, escorted by a score of red-skins and outlaws.

"Well, what on earth have you struck now, men?" asked the outlaw chief, as he fixed his gaze upon the woman whose face wore a look of anger and lofty disdain.

"An old gal," replied one of the escort, "that says she is the lawful rib of Kit Bandy."

"Is that true, madam?" asked the captain.

"It is—true!" she declared, with emphasis.

"Then, my dear madam, it is my painful duty to break to you the melancholy news of your being a widow. Your husband was killed to-day by his friend—one Stonewall Bob."

A wild, hysterical cry burst from the woman's lips, and dropping from her saddle to the ground she fell upon her knees, and covering her face with her hands gave way to a paroxysm of grief that would have moved any one to tears but those stony-hearted outlaws and savages; and even they stood silent and motionless until the woman had quieted her grief and rose to her feet, saying:

"But perhaps he's better off dead than livin', though if he'd stayed with me whom he promised to cherish and protect instead o' gaddin' all 'round over all creation, he might 'a' lived many happy, happy years yet. Poor, miserable old wretch! Folkses, I'd like to give him a decent burial, and if it isn't too much trouble I would like to look upon his body."

"You shall be conducted to where his remains are at once," assured Captain Vulture, the idea flashing into his brain in an instant that, by permitting the woman to enter the cut with a

torch to look for Bandy's body, the situation in the dug-out might be disclosed.

A bundle of pine sticks was prepared and one end of it lighted, then accompanied by Sabina and followed by half of the band, the outlaw chief led the way toward the dug-out.

Reaching the entrance to the narrow passage leading to the cave, he handed Sabina the torch, saying:

"He fell in that narrow passage about two-thirds of the distance to the cave. You'll find the bodies of several of our friends in there too, but pass right on over them. It may be that Stonewall Bob has dragged Bandy's body into the cave, but then you'll find out when you get in there."

"Ar'n't you goin' in with me?" Sabina asked.

"No, I believe not," was the reply.

"Well, I'm not afeard to go alone," she said, and raising the torch above her head, she advanced into the passage.

The outlaws, as if expecting a volley from the cave, did not expose their persons to view, but standing on either edge of the cut they leaned forward and peered down into the fateful passage in extreme caution and in dread suspense.

Sabina slowly advanced, uttering cries of horror at sight of the dead bodies, each of which she examined as she passed over it.

But among all the bodies she did not find that of her husband, and the two-score pair of eyes peering over either edge of the rift saw her pass on into the dug-out unchallenged.

Then followed moments of dire suspense on the part of the outlaws; but after exploring the cave Sabina went back to the entrance thereto, and holding her torch above her head shrieked out to them:

"Kit Bandy's body's not here—and there's not a thing in this hole, either, but a dead bear. Have you fellers been tryin' to deceive me? Shame! shame!"

As she uttered these words in a voice sepulchral in its intonations, her face looked sorrowful and ogish; and the straggling locks falling about her head and neck—seemingly aquiver with life as the wavering light of the torch danced over them—the black depths of the cave behind her, and the smoking, glaring torch—all gave her the appearance of the weird Sibyl that Eneas met at the entrance to the infernal regions.

A murmured exclamation escaped from the lips above her as her announcement fell upon their ears. Captain Vulture and his friend, Jack Bramble, exchanged glances that spoke their feelings plainer than words. Finally Bramble said:

"Have we been duped in the death of Kit Bandy?"

"It seems so," replied the outlaw chief. "I do wonder if we are fools, Bramble? or are our foes so darned much smarter than one hundred of us can't, by brute force, kill one of their men? Say, what do you think about it?"

"I think we're in a very dupable condition, captain," replied Bramble; "and we've got to adopt more vigorous measures. I'm going to explore that cave. Old Bandy's body might have been buried in there—at any rate, I'll see, or die."

And he did. He strode boldly through the passage over his dead friends, and taking the torch from Sabina's hand examined every nook and corner of the cave—even peering into the hole from whence the bear had appeared.

"Old woman," the facetious villain finally observed, "I guess you're not a widdier after all. It appears that your galavanting husband has been resurrected or else his cadaver has been spirited away."

"Dear, dear!" sighed the woman, "will my troubles and trials never, never end?"

"We'll do all we can, Mrs. Bandy, to help you end them," Bramble responded; "I assure you we are as anxious as you are, to see your husband gathered to the bosom of Abraham; and if I can only get within pistol-shot of him I'll grant you a bill of divorce and marry you myself."

"Never!" shrieked Sabina; "one 'scape-gallows is all I want to marry!"

This retort was greeted by a loud laugh from a number of Bramble's friends who had come into the cave since it had been found deserted.

In the course of a few moments Bramble, Sabina and the outlaws wended their way from the dug-out when the entire party began retracing their steps toward the camp. They had gone but a short distance when their ears were greeted by sounds of savage triumph coming from up the river.

Satisfied that something unusual, at least, had happened, the party hurried forward, and as they entered the camp from the east half a dozen Indians came in from the west leading in their midst Wild Gypsy, a weeping captive!

"Thank fortune for small favors!" exclaimed Captain Vulture, at sight of the helpless maiden's drooping form and lovely face.

CHAPTER XIX.

KIT BANDY'S DARING ADVENTURE.

WHILE the outlaws had mistrusted that Stonewall Bob had escaped with the maidens from the

cave of refuge, they were completely astounded when they discovered that the body of Old Kit Bandy, whom they firmly believed dead, was gone. But the idea of attempting to escape with the maidens had never entered the old detective's mind until a few minutes before he proceeded to carry it into execution.

Unknown to Stonewall Bob, he had followed close at his heels when the Boy Trojan started to follow the panic-stricken outlaws from the passage. Within the shadows of the cut, however, he halted, and crouching low, awaited the result of Stonewall's adventure. All he had to judge by was the ear, but as soon as the yelling on the hillside ceased he heard the defeated assailants telling of their repulse and knew at once that Bob's escape had not been discovered.

A few minutes later he heard calls from up the river—calls of distress that at once drew the excited horde away from the cave, and it was at this moment that the idea of escape was suggested to the old detective-scout.

Hastening back to the maidens Kit told them that he felt satisfied that the way was open for their escape, and asked their opinion as to making the effort. Having the utmost faith in the old man, they announced their readiness to go whither he might lead, and five minutes later they passed from the gloomy dug-out out into the almost as gloomy night. Not a savage or outlaw was present to challenge them, and taking each of the girls by the hand, Old Kit led them close along the base of the bluffs where the shadows lay the deepest.

Ever and anon the fugitives stopped to listen. They could hear a great confusion among the foe, and as they were really approaching them—which was necessary to escape from the valley—their excited voices and fierce maledictions could be distinctly heard, but a firmer grasp of Old Kit's hand gave the maidens renewed courage.

An obstacle, however, that the old detective had not expected was suddenly thrown before them. The great, roaring bonfire of the foe was burning in a little opening which extended from the base of the almost perpendicular bluffs to the river. Across this line of light the fugitives must pass to make good their escape, but as there were no less than three-score of enemies—mostly lynx-eyed savages—standing within sixty feet of them he felt that the undertaking would be extremely hazardous at that time, and so he concluded to remain still and watch for a more favorable opportunity to cross the light.

"Be nerry, gals," he said, in a whisper to the maidens, "we'll wait here a few minutes till a good opportunity's offered to skip over that line of light."

From where they stood they could hear nearly every word spoken by the foe, and by stooping down where the foliage of the bushes was not so dense, Kit could see most of the excited mob. And to his joy he saw most of them preparing to leave, and when, in the course of a few minutes, Captain Vulture, Jack Bramble, and the bruised and battered Jim Noel were left alone, the old man again took the girls by the hand, saying, in a whisper:

"Now, gals, our time has come. Be quick as a cat and silent as shadows."

Silently they crept from the bushes and glided across the line of light and entered the darkness of the thicket beyond unseen or unheard by the foe.

"There," said Kit, with a breath of relief, "I think—I hope, at least, that we're apast the worst danger."

Fast as possible the three hurried on still keeping close to the base of the frowning bluffs. They passed by several Indian ponies that had been turned loose with their bridles on to browse among the bushes; and finally they heard the sound of voices on their right which convinced Kit that a part of the foe, at least, that had left a short time before, were returning to camp, and the excitement they manifested aroused in the old man's mind a fear that Stonewall Bob had been killed or captured. This he could have determined by going back to where he could command a view of the camp, but every moment was precious to him now and he pressed on.

It was some time before the fugitives cleared the dense thicket and reached the open plain where traveling was easier but dangers greater.

As they entered the plain Bandy was surprised to find Miss Graves in an almost exhausted condition. She was trembling in body and limb, and her breathing was labored. A reaction was setting in. During all her captivity and hours of danger she had borne up bravely, but now that the worst seemed passed overtaken nature began to give way under the great physical and mental strain.

Bandy discovered her condition with a sense of the deepest regret. They were not yet safe beyond all dangers, and yet he saw that she could travel no further on foot. The only way out of this serious and unexpected difficulty was for him to leave the girls and return and secure a horse from the enemy.

As this proposition met with no objections from the girls he left them in concealment and hurried away in the direction of the enemy's camp. He was not gone over half an hour, re-

turning with a pony and a horse. On the former Gypsy was mounted, and owing to Ruth's prostration Kit took her upon the horse with him, and, thus mounted, the three rode away over the valley.

The old border detective's objective point was, of course, the camp on the river where he had left his friends the previous night. He now hoped to reach it before, or as soon, as Stonewall Bob, although he considered it policy to make a wide detour on the plain to elude new dangers.

But for all his plans, his caution, and his hopes, fate was against him. He had not gone over forty rods after entering the open valley when a score of mounted enemies came thundering from the darkness of the brush and wood in pursuit of them, yelling like demons possessed.

Gypsy's horse, accustomed to dash away at the sound of the Indian war-whoop, was in no way false to its teachings, and in an instant it bounded away like a deer across the valley. Gypsy was not an experienced rider, and was therefore unable to control the pony, but exerted just strength enough upon the rein to turn the animal out of the course they were pursuing and carry her back into the power of the foe.

Old Kit endeavored to follow her, but his horse, under its double burden, was no match for the pony. In fact, the old detective saw that the Indians were fast gaining upon him, and he finally came to the conclusion that he would have to fight to save even himself and the one girl from capture. However, he resolved to continue the flight until forced to stop and defend himself and friend.

He had gone but a short distance further when he saw the shadowy forms of a number of horsemen rise up before him out of the darkness of the plain, and instantly the thoughts flashed through his brain—were they friends or foes?

Before he could turn to either right or left, his ears were greeted by a deep, yet clear, sonorous voice ringing out:

"Halt there!"

Despite the darkness, the noise of the howling mob behind him, and the general excitement of the moment, Bandy recognized the voice in an instant as that of Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan, and at once began checking the speed of his horse; but before he could stop the animal he had plunged through the ranks of his friends who, on horseback, were drawn up in battle array to receive the foe they heard approaching over the plain.

"I'm Kit Bandy, Bob, and 're got one o' the gals!—look out, the red bellies are arter me!" roared the old detective, as he dashed apast his friends.

Before the words were scarcely out of his mouth Stonewall shouted:

"Revolvers, boys, and fire!"

The next instant the rattling crash and "pop" of revolvers were mingled with the yells of the savages whose cries were at once changed to those of surprise and dismay.

The red-skins were completely taken by surprise and unprepared for the assault. The presence of the plainsmen was unknown to them until they heard the thunderous voice of the Boy Trojan, and even then they were too close to turn aside to elude the murderous fire of the whites, whose revolvers, flashing in their very faces, struck terror into their savage hearts.

CHAPTER XX.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

THE sudden meeting of the plainsmen and savages was like the meeting of two angry waves in mid-ocean, but here the comparison ends, for while the greater of the two waves overwhelms and swallows up the lesser, such was not the case in the meeting of the human foes, for the force of the red-skins was thrice that of the whites and yet they were almost annihilated before the survivors could fairly comprehend the situation and flee from beyond reach of the deadly revolvers.

The work of the whites, it seemed, could not have been more effective had it been open daylight. Most of them had become so accustomed to working and fighting in the night that both eye and ear, like the cat's, had become trained to the darkness. And yet so eager were the victorious plainsmen to speak with Kit Bandy that none of them attempted to pursue the escaped foe, but at once turned and rode back to where Kit and Ruth had dismounted.

"Howling tempests, Bandy!" cried Stonewall Bob, who was the first to reach the old detective-scout and his charge, "how in Heaven's name did you get here?"

"Walked, rode, and raced, Bob," was Kit's answer.

"Oh, Robert!" cried Ruth, staggering to the brave boy, who had dismounted, and grasping his arm for support, "I am so glad to know you are safe, but poor little Gypsy! I—"

"Ruth, my child! God be thanked that we met again!"

It was Mahlon Graves who thus spoke as he rushed forward and clasped his child to his breast, while Ruth, throwing her arms about his neck, sobbed in joyful silence.

"Kitsie," said Old Rattler, as he came up and grasped his old pard's hand, "I'm tempestuous

glad to agitate your paw again. To git here I know, from what Stonewall was just tellin', that you've been doin' gorgeo'us line work."

"Yes, Rattler," replied Kit, "and it war by the merest accident in the world that I did not save both the gals."

"Then little Gypsy is again in the hands of the enemy?" said Zeke Ruble.

"There's little doubt o' it, old friend. The boss she war on became unmanageable and darted off before I could prevent it, situated as I was with Miss Ruth."

"Poor child! may God protect her!" sighed One-Armed Phil, in a tone of bitter anguish, for since he had learned that Wild Gypsy was his sister, he had hoped and prayed for her rescue and an early meeting with her. But now his hopes seemed blighted forever, and only the remembrance of the face of Wild Gypsy, as seen on the ledge in the mountain pass, lingered in his mind like the vision of a dream.

"We were on our way to your rescue, Kit," Stonewall said, to break the silence of grief and disappointment that followed Phil's words of sadness and sorrow.

"Perhaps I did wrong," replied Bandy, with a tinge of regret in his tone, "in not waitin' for you at the dug-out."

"No, no," quickly responded One-Armed Phil and Zeke Ruble, *sotto voce*; "no one knows better what is best for him to do than Kit Bandy," Ruble continued; "I know you did what you believed was best, and what no doubt was best, for some of us, and perhaps all, would have fallen had we undertaken to fight our way to the cave."

"Well, there's no time to be spared even now," Kit said, "for the other gal must be rescued either by force or by strategy. But before we attempt either we will have to know the exact position of the foe and the disposition of the captive. As I've been runnin' the range over I think I'm the very feller to make a reconnaissance, and that now's the time for me to strike."

"Look here, Old Kit Bandy," said Rattler, "you're a brave man, a cheerful, jolly companion, and a smart detective, but you're selfish. You're willin' to share your last crumb o' bread and last drop o' w—water, but you are swinish about sharin' the honors of war—you want it all."

"Pard, by the horn o' Joshua! we'll all have haydoogins o' war afore we git Gypsy, and secure that criminal, Rossgrove. We've got to fight our way clear through to the outlaws' den from this on, I'm thinkin'."

"Mr. Bandy," said Zeke Ruble, "I had almost forgotten, in our excitement, to tell you that I met your wife Sabine at our old camp to-night, and despite my entreaties she left camp and rode away in the direction of the Hermit Dome."

"Horn o' Joshua! do you mean that, Zeke, or are you tryin' to frighten me outen my liver?"

"It's the Book-o'-Revelations truth, Kitsie," declared Old Rattler, with a chuckle.

"Then, pards," said Kit, "we must part here and now. I can stand it to fight Ingins and outlaws, b'ars and cyclones, flood and fire, sin and sorro', but I'm not goin' to be caught babboonin' with a buzz-saw. So good-by, boys, and look out for breakers."

With this the old man turned and moved away in the direction of the Hermit Dome.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed One-Armed Phil, "I hope he hasn't left us in this—"

"No, no," put in Rattler; "he's foolishin'. You couldn't scare, hire, nor drive him away. I know Bandy; he's a darlin' ole buccaneer."

"And I'll bet he can hold his own with his wife, if she don't use anything but lip," said Rambling Dan, the Boy Mountaineer, "for, oh! Scotland! isn't he a rattler on the talk?"

"Yes, lad, voluminous as the Spanish chronicles, whatever that be, but when it comes to fightin', he's the most numerous man I ever seed, and the way he scatters destruction are a caution to a whirlwind. If there's a gal into the hoodoo, he's so constituted that he can ladle out sweet words to her with one hand, so to speak, and fight for her life with the other, as it war. No, my kid, thar's but one Kit Bandy in all this big, bad world, and he's a hull generation o' crusaders concentrated into one."

Until Bandy should return from his reconnaissance the party was to remain there upon the plain. Rambling Dan, whose sense of sight and hearing in the darkness was phenomenal, was placed on guard, while Old Rattler sat down to entertain his friends with some of his rollicking stories that were calculated to drive dull care and grief from the minds of his listeners.

Ruth Graves had gradually recovered from her temporary prostration. Being safe with her father, and in the presence of the daring, heroic Boy Trojan again, she regained some of her wonted spirit; and in the course of an hour or two she and Stonewall Bob found themselves walking side by side some distance from their friends, conversing together in a low, quiet tone, that finally led Old Rattler to say to One-Armed Phil:

"Philip, them youngsters are goners—salt-peter won't save 'em."

"I do not know what you mean, Rattler—what you have reference to."

"To that joke, that old, wall-eyed joke called—Love."

"Oh!—well, they are a splendid pair, at any rate," answered Phil, with a sad smile.

The young couple having seated themselves upon the grass a few rods from their friends, Ruth said:

"How fortunate it was for me, Robert, that you and your brave friends were on the line of the outlaws' retreat to the mountains."

"Yes, I have thought of that myself, Miss Graves," Stonewall replied; "but my greatest and happiest surprise is of your having stood up so well under all the perils and suffering that you have been subjected to within the past two weeks. I am convinced now, that it is not always the strongest that can bear the most trouble and pain."

"I thank you for your compliment, Robert, but I must confess that I have more strength and fortitude than I ever supposed I possessed."

"One cannot tell what they are possessed of until tried—especially in a case like yours."

"Well, of one thing I am certain, Robert, and that is to you alone in my first danger, and you and your brave friends in my second, I owe my life and a debt of gratitude I will never be able to pay."

"Time will tell, Ruth—Miss Graves," the young plainsman replied, slightly confused; "our acquaintance has been of but a few days, yet decidedly pleasant and happy to me, and there is a demand which I could make of you that would more than repay all I have done for you; but it would be presumptuous on my part to take any advantage of your present peace of mind or perilous and embarrassing situation. I should not have said even this much, and sincerely beg your pardon."

Ruth's heart fluttered wildly, joyfully. Her woman's instinct, as well as her own intuitive feelings told her plainly enough that big, brave Robert Comstock loved her; and by her silence the Boy Trojan mistrusted that she had read his mind and heart, and to relieve her of what seemed embarrassment, he continued:

"It begins to appear to me now that an unseen power guided me and my friends into this country. It is true, we came here on our way to the hills having in view the capture of a criminal—a murderer for whom there is a very large reward offered, but this fugitive has been the agent employed by fate to bring about your rescue upon two different occasions."

"Then your journey's end has not been reached?" Ruth said, in evident disappointment. "I had hoped that you and your friends would return with us, for I now see that one is never safe in this country unless well protected."

"The headquarters of the very outlaw band that is giving us so much trouble now is our destination. It is said that the criminal we seek is installed there, the moving power behind all the cunningness of the outlaws and red-skins. And it may be such a thing that your capture has been by command of that villain. You see the outlaws keep spies out at various points, and when you crossed the Missouri your fair face may have been seen by a spy, and your destination being ascertained, the same was reported to Ross-grove."

"Ross-grove did you say, Robert?" Ruth exclaimed, with a start, her voice betraying some agitation.

"Yes," Stonewall answered: "have you ever heard the name before, Miss Graves?"

"I have," she answered, with trembling lips—her breath coming hard as if something heavy was pressing upon her breast; "but do you know of what crime he is guilty?"

"Of murder," he said, a fellow man, was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to be hanged, but escaped, and for years has eluded justice. But I see this subject is distasteful to you, Miss Graves, therefore I will drop it."

"No, no, Robert," she quickly replied, "I'm interested now and want to know all about Ross-grove. I heard Rattler say something about a large reward being offered for a criminal; was that criminal, Ross-grove?"

"It was. I believe Kit said that the party offering the reward was named Israel Danbaugh."

A deep sigh almost a groan, escaped Ruth's lips. She buried her face in her hands and on the instant gave way to some emotion of grief that seemed to convulse her whole body.

Stonewall was completely astounded by this sudden change in the maiden's spirit. He could not understand why she should become so affected by what he had told her of Ross-grove, the criminal, and he was at his wits' end to know how to extricate himself from the delicate situation he found himself in. Ruth, however, suddenly started up, and brushing a flood of tears from her eyes, said:

"Robert, I presume you think me foolish, but I cannot help it. To me there is more in a name you have mentioned than you could possibly imagine there was!"

"Indeed?" Bob replied, in no little surprise: "had I known that I was of use and interest to you, Ruth, I would not for all creation wound your feelings knowingly. But since the matter has come up, I hope I may have your

confidence for I know not whether the name you refer to is Ross-grove or Danbaugh."

"Robert Comstock," she said, stifling her emotions and speaking in a firm, resolute voice, "I shall keep nothing from you who have risked so much for me, though you may feel, when I have told you all, that I am unworthy of all you have so kindly, so gallantly and bravely done for me."

"I am sure I cannot imagine what bearing your secret has upon your life," said Stonewall, "but I care not what it may be, I would risk in your behalf again all that I have in the past. But do not, I pray, make any revelations to me that will be distasteful and humiliating to you."

"You are truly a kind and generous man, Robert," she replied, "but I cannot keep from you my secret, and that is—the criminal you are hunting down John Ross-grove, is my own father!"

CHAPTER XXII.

KIT BANDY'S RECONNOISSANCE.

WITHIN an hour after leaving his friends Kit Bandy was back on the river within ear-shot of the enemy's camp.

The Indians and outlaws were evidently all in, and a conference of no little seriousness was being held. At one side he saw Wild Gypsy and his spouse, Sabina, seated side by side apparently engaged in conversation, while a big, burly outlaw stood near watching them. Three or four wounded red-skins lay a short distance from the fire; one or two dead ones could also be seen, and Jim Noel's hideous face was quite conspicuous in the camp which had every appearance of having been visited by a small cyclone.

It was evident from the excited voice and gestures of the chief of the renegade Indians, Turtle-Face, that that worthy was in no amiable mood. He, Captain Vulture and Jack Bramble were discussing the situation. It seemed that the last defeat of the Indians by the plainsmen had aroused the chief's anger, and Kit, as he listened to their conversation, felt in hopes that the matter was going to terminate in a revolt of the red-skins.

Creeping as close as he dared, the old detective heard Turtle-Face say:

"My warriors have fallen around me like autumn leaves, and yet not a pale-face foe's scalp has been taken. All we can show for many lives are them two squaws, and Turtle-Face will fight no more here with his white friends, the Red Vultures."

"You will surely not leave us, will you, chief?" Bramble was heard to ask, in a pleading tone.

"Turtle-Face," replied the chief, "has spoken. He will not fight the white foe whose guns reach far over the plain, and whose revolvers are more deadly than Sioux rifles. When the sun rises again, Turtle-Face will take his warriors and go back to the hills. There alone will he fight the foe among the rocks and the trees where the pale-face bullets cannot find his graves."

"Well," replied Captain Vulture, evidently disappointed, "if you leave us, chief, with your warriors, the scalps of those pale-faces that have killed our friends will never be taken."

"The Red Vultures," replied the chief, "have two white squaws there. Take them off into the hills. The pale-face hunters will follow to rescue them. Turtle-Face's warriors will hide among the rocks in the narrow valley. When the pale-faces come along the Sioux will shoot them down. Then will the scalp of the big pale-face brave hang at Turtle-Face's girdle. Again Turtle-Face has spoken. Let the Red Vultures now speak."

"Chief," said Captain Vulture, seeing there was no other compromise to be made with the sullen savage, "your plan is a good one. The head of Turtle-Face is as clear as his heart is brave. The Red Vultures will go with the Indians. They will take the old squaw and the young. The pale-faces will follow, as a matter of course, and then your braves can mow them. Now I have spoken."

Apparently satisfied, the chief turned and walked away, and as soon as he was gone Captain Vulture and Bramble separated also, the former going over and entering into a conversation with Sabina, whose indignant speech did not indicate a dejected spirit.

Kit's fingers fairly itched to send a bullet through the heart of the outlaw chief, and when he got ready to leave his position he could not resist the temptation to pick up a rock the size of his fist, and, during an outburst of laughter at some remark of Sabina's, hurl it over into a group of savages. Had a bombshell exploded in their midst it would not have caused greater consternation. A red-skin was struck down senseless by the missile, although no one had seen from whence it came. In fact, no one saw the missile at all, but they heard the blow and saw the warrior go down.

And while the camp was the scene of excitement and confusion, Kit Bandy crept away and started on his return to his friends. On the way he came upon some ponies among the bushes, and catching one of them he mounted it and continued on at a swinging gallop. When he reached the edge of the plain he stopped to listen. He

heard a movement of men and horses back toward the enemy's camp that he could not understand, and his curiosity getting the better of him, he dismounted, hitched his pony and stole back through the woods and brush to ascertain the cause of the movement. He finally reached a point from where he could command a view of the camp, and to his surprise and disappointment he saw the place deserted. The foe had broken camp and with their captives started for the mountains. He could hear them but a short distance away moving around the base of the Hermit Dome—just above which was an Indian ford where they evidently intended to cross the river.

Kit's first impulse was to hurry away to his friends and then with them hasten across to the river and intercept the foe, but a second thought convinced him that it would be impossible to do this before they crossed the river. However, the old man was in no way discouraged, and turning he again began retracing his footsteps back to his friends.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RUTH'S STORY.

STONEWALL BOB could not suppress his emotions of startling surprise at Ruth Graves's revelation of John Ross-grove being her father, for it fell upon his ears like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky. Ruth noticed it and it seemed to overwhelm her with grief and move her into tears.

In his confusion and great sympathy for the beautiful girl, Bob reached out and taking her hand in his—a liberty she did not resent—he said, in a kind, sympathetic tone:

"Ruth, my dear friend, I confess your revelation is as startling as it is sad; but do not grieve. God knows you cannot help the stain that attaches to your father's name."

"No, Robert," she replied, the hot tears falling upon his hand, and her lips quivering with some deep emotion, "but, but then—"

"But what, Ruth?"

"But you—"

"Never mind me, Ruth," the young plainsman again interrupted, "my regards for you are deep-rooted in my breast, and even though you were the daughter of Captain Vulture himself, they would be all the deeper out of sympathy for one so unfortunate, yet so deserving of all that innocent and noble womanhood is entitled to."

"Oh, Robert! you are truly a noble fellow," the maiden replied, a thrill of joy rousing her despondent spirit, and wreathing her white lips with a hopeful smile; "but isn't it rather a strange coincidence that while you are risking your life for the child—"

"Ruth, why pursue this subject that is so distressing to you?" interrupted Stonewall.

"Now that it has been introduced, Robert, I must tell you all, if you will hear me."

"Certainly, Ruth, if it is your pleasure."

"I never saw my father," the girl went on, "that I remember. My dear mother died when I was but two years of age. At the time of her death my aunt Rachel, a widow lady, came from a distant State and took me home with her. Soon after this she married Mr. Graves, who has been to me a kind and loving father. Soon after mother's death father went to California where he remained four years, and then returned to Rushville, where his old home was. From there he wrote to uncle Graves that he was going to pay us a visit in a few days. But he never came. In the settlement of some business between him and a Mr. Henry Endicott they had a bitter quarrel, which came near resulting in violence at the time. As father and Mr. Endicott were both prominent men in the village the difficulty created quite a sensation, and the sympathy of the community was nearly equally divided between them. But on the second night after the quarrel Mr. Endicott was shot down dead on the street. On the information of two men, named Rosenberg and Quinlan, father was arrested for the murder, though solemnly protesting his innocence. But Rosenberg and Quinlan swore they saw him do the deed, and as everybody knew of the quarrel, the situation looked gloomy indeed."

"Father was indicted and convicted of murder in the first degree and sentenced to be hanged in six weeks. But three weeks before that time the jail was fired, and during the excitement that prevailed father escaped and they never recaptured him. Time he is still living there is no doubt, for, about once in two years, the sheriff of the county in which he was convicted receives a letter from him declaring his innocence of Endicott's murder and expressing a hope that the real truth would some day be known. He also wrote to uncle Mahlon Graves, speaking feelingly of his child, whom the wickedness of men had made worse than fatherless, and of his wandering a fugitive on the face of the earth for others' crimes."

"His letters bore no address and the postmarks were of places located in distant countries. No two that I ever heard of came from the same place, and this is what bothered the detectives so that they have been led from one place to another, and all to no purpose, for nearly twenty years. I have heard nothing

from him for three years until this hour, but the last we did hear led us to believe he was in British Columbia."

"Then your uncle Graves never saw him?" said Bob.

"No, sir; while he was under arrest uncle Graves lay very sick, and for this reason we were unable to visit father while he was in prison. Uncle Mahlon Graves would not know father if he should meet him. There was not a picture of him in existence at the time of his flight."

"Then your aunt is not living—the one who took you to her home when your mother died?"

"No, sir; she died four years ago, and after that uncle Mahlon failed in business, and finally he and four friends resolved to seek a fortune in the gold-hills. He gave me my choice of accompanying him or remaining with a sister of his. But being of an adventurous spirit, I chose the former, and I assure you that the adventures and perils I have passed through have taken all that spirit of romance out of me. But, Robert, what evidence have you that father is one of Captain Vulture's band?"

"I must confess that I do not know," Bob replied; "the case was given to Kit Bandy, the noted mountain detective, with the promise of a large reward in case of Ross-grove's capture. In addition to the reward offered by the State in which the murder was committed, ten times larger reward was also offered by a gentleman named Danbaugh—Israel Danbaugh."

"Israel Danbaugh!" exclaimed Ruth; "why, he is father's cousin!"

"You don't tell me! Then why on earth should he want his relative hung? I supposed, and so did Kit, that he was a relative of the murdered man, Mr. Endicott. Danbaugh was in Deadwood some weeks ago, and there is where he employed Old Kit to hunt the criminal down. Knowing the many dangers to be encountered the old detective employed Old Tom Rattler, Zeke Ruble and myself to assist him, One-Armed Phil going along of his own accord. I do not know what evidence Danbaugh has of Ross-grove being in Vulture's band, but it seems to be settled that he is there. I have not had an opportunity since I met Kit on the Moreau, to converse with him on the subject. I understand, however, that Ross-grove never rides with the band. He may be a cripple if he is an outlaw. But now, Ruth, for your sake, I hope our trip to the outlaw stronghold will be a failure."

"I thank you, Robert, for your kindness to me, and yet I would not ask you to forego any duty of honor you owe to any one on my account. But I desire to say further, in relation to my father, that my aunt Rachel always believed he was innocent of the murder. She said he had always been an upright and honorable citizen, and did not believe he was capable of such a crime. But then people might say it was natural for her to say so as he was a relative. For the same reason, perhaps, I have always felt that he was innocent, and if your trip reveals anything I hope it may be that he is not one of Captain Vulture's band."

"Ruth, within the past few minutes it has occurred to my mind that such a thing as your father being with this outlaw band is impossible, or else he would have discovered something about you or your name that would have led to your identity. Even had he learned through a spy, or otherwise, that Mahlon Graves with you was crossing the plain, he would never have directed or favored a violent attack upon the train at the risk of so many lives. If he is innocent of the murder, as he claims in his letters, why should he be an outlaw? Why a criminal here, if he trusts to the future to prove his innocence there? I'm beginning to believe, since you told me Danbaugh was your father's cousin, that there is something about that murder the world knows nothing of. I'll swear I don't believe the father of Ruth Graves is a murderer or outlaw, though he may be a fugitive."

"I fully appreciate your compliments, Robert, and hope that time will prove that you are right."

At this juncture the young folks were interrupted by the presence of Zeke Ruble, who strolled out to where they sat and said:

"Beg pardon for intruding on you, folks."

"It's no intrusion, Zeke," Stonewall replied.

The hunter came closer, and dropping upon his knees opened a conversation with them about the situation. He asked many questions about Gypsy, for it had been made known to both Bob and Ruth that he was the foster-father of the little maid. Ruth told him of their capture and of Gypsy's resolute courage through all their dangers.

In the course of a few minutes One-Armed Phil joined them, and he, too, was eager and anxious to hear about Gypsy.

After Phil and Ruble both went away, Stonewall said to Ruth:

"There are two more brave souls that have suffered more than tongue can tell, especially One-Armed Phil."

"This is a wicked world, Robert," Ruth replied, "and it is always the innocent that have to suffer most. But I am going to talk with uncle Graves about your mission into this country. I must tell him of Israel Danbaugh's anxiety for

the capture of my poor father, and get his opinion of it."

"Do so, by all means," answered Bob, "and perhaps he will lay the matter before Kit Bandy, who has a marvelous gift of weaving solid fabrics of facts out of the merest threads of evidence—Ah! I hear Bandy's voice now; he's returned from his reconnaissance of the enemy's camp."

Stonewall sprang to his feet, and assisting Ruth to rise, the two started toward their friends whom they reached in time to hear Old Kit saying:

"The hull Ingin and outlaw outfit has pulled up, crossed the river and gone for the hills takin' with them little Gypsy and my wife Sabina. And now, friends, as to little Gypsy, by the horn o' Joshua! they shall not keep her, and as for my wife Sabina, by the confusion o' Babel, they cannot keep her!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

STONEWALL STARTS FOR THE INDIAN VILLAGE.

The news Old Kit brought back was a surprise and disappointment to all. To Zeke Ruble and One-Armed Phil, whose interest in the welfare of Gypsy had now become mutual, it was bitter, for if the foe once gained the fastnesses of the mountains there would be little hope of the maiden's rescue.

"I got within a decent earshot o' the camp," Bandy said, narrating his adventures; "and I looked upon little Gypsy in her helplessness, Jim Noel in his beauty, and my wife Sabina, whose melodious voice I heard doin' some o' the prettiest word-paintin' I ever heard. She just sloshed the loudest colors all over that camp, and the way them fool Ingins and outlaws laughed war a caution to forty-seven jackals in a grave yard. I also heard a con-dab between Captain Vulture, Jack Bramble and the chief, Turtle-Face. The Ingin was in a bad humor. So many o' his warriors had been slain, and no income either, that he was resolved to pull off and leave the outlaws unless they 'dopted his way o' fightin', and that was to sneak off into the hills and ambush us."

"To this old Vulture agreed, of course, and they war to carry both Gypsy and Sabina with 'em so that we'd foller to rescue 'em and by that means run into their dead-trap."

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler. "they'll give us a deal o' trouble if that's their game."

"That's no doubt o' that," responded Bandy; "in fact, we'll hardly dare to venture into the mountains against the outlaws backed by forty or fifty outlaw Indians red-hot for vengeance."

"In God's name, what shall we do?" asked One-Armed Phil.

"That's two ways I could suggest, and one is to send to the fort for troops and—"

"That's impracticable, Zeke," interrupted Old Kit. "for before the post-commandant reported to the division commander, and he to Washington, when like as not a cabinet meeting would have to be called and the matter cabined over, and maybe a few telegrams o' inquiry sent, and then the order given to move, and then the soldiers have to polish their shoes and furbish up their buttons, and be put on dress-parade and then marched to the hills, perhaps little Gypsy would die of old age, and my wife Sabina—but what's the use talkin'? If I war going to suggest anything for our immediate relief, it'd be to send to the village o' Black Bear a friendly chief and ask him to send a band o' warriors to help clean out them mountain coyotes, root and branch."

"That's the gospel, Kistsie," declared Old Rattler; "your old noodle's level, if it's holler. The instincts o' self preservation are strong within you, while your bumps o' caution stick out in chunks all over your Adonis-like form. Send for the red-skins, by all means, Kistsie, and then we'll see if two can't play that little ambush game."

"Wal," said Old Kit, "who's the feller to go?—one that knows the way, and has influence with the chief when he gits there?"

Stonewall advanced closer to Kit, saying:

"Old pard, it has been something less than one year since I rescued Singing-Bird, the daughter of Black Bear, from the clutches of a white villain, and knowing an Indian never forgets a kindness nor an insult, I feel confident I would have some influence with the chief. At any rate, I'm willing to risk it, and start at once."

"But will not the journey be attended with great dangers?" Ruth Graves asked, unable to conceal the interest she felt in the welfare of the Boy Trojan.

"No doubt o' it, Miss Ruth, but we trust Bob's akal to any emergency," answered Old Kit. "It is only by takin' chances that we bordermen ever accomplish anything."

Stonewall at once made preparations for departure. It was all of fifty miles to Black Bear's village. The strongest and fleetest horse was saddled and bridled for him. Then, with the best wishes of all, the "God speed you" of Ruth, whose swimming eyes told of her deep solicitude, the young plainsman mounted and galloped away through the night.

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, as the boy disappeared. "that big, brave youth's leavin' us makes a terrible hole in our crowd that can't be filled by any other."

"Just the reverse o' your goin' away, Kistsie," said Rattler. "for in that case a terrible hole or yawp'd be closed, and all'd be as quiet and serene as two lovers watchin' the moon rise 'bove the tree-tops."

"Rattler, you beautiful bush-ranger, you're eternally tryin' to rooin' my reputation, but then your efforts are like a bloodthirsty goat tryin' to butt down Pike's Peak 'cause it see'd the reflection o' its ornery self in a puddle o' water."

"Gentlemen," said Mahlon Graves, who did not understand the two old borderers, "I hope you will not become personal in your remarks."

"Oh, Rosycrusians!" replied Rattler, "never. Mr. Graves; I'd think no more o' gittin' ruffled at Bandy's remarks than at a pretty gal stealin' a kiss from me every hour or so. No, I talk jist to amuse Kit."

In spite of the party's depression of spirits they

could not suppress a smile, and some of them laughed outright. In fact, this was what the old men were after. They knew that nothing so tended to defeat and disaster as a dejected spirit, and there was just enough of the humorous in their own natures to keep that enemy away.

By this time the night was well advanced, and after a short consultation it was decided that they should move over to the Moreau and encamp till morning.

As the horses were already saddled, the party, with the exception of Kit and Rattler, mounted and moved away, the two old bordermen leading the way on foot.

Without any trouble they soon reached the river and went into camp in the timber, not far from the old Indian crossing above the Hermit Dome.

A tent, or bower, was constructed of bushes and blankets for Ruth, and the maiden at once sought rest therein.

Rambling Dan and One-Armed Phil went on guard and as soon as all had become settled and quiet, Mahlon Graves turned to Bandy and said:

"Mr. Bandy, my daughter, in conversation with Stonewall Bob, learned that you and your friends were in this vicinity, hunting down a criminal named John Ross-grove."

"That's a fact, sir," answered Kit, "though I, or Bob either, would have said nothing 'bout it had there been any likelihoods o' our man gittin' wind o' what we war after and skipped out."

"And I also understand," Graves continued, "that one Israel Danbaugh is the man that employed you."

"Yes, sir, and Israel comes down handsomely, too."

"Did he tell you why he wanted Ross-grove hunted down?"

"No, but he intimated, and I supposed, that he war a relative o' the murdered man whose death he wanted to see avenged."

"On the contrary, Mr. Bandy, he is a cousin of the man, John Ross-grove!"

"You don't tell me?" exclaimed Kit. "Then you must know Ross-grove and Danbaugh both!"

"I do not know them personally, but I know Ross-grove well by reputation, and have heard of Danbaugh."

"Then you've heard of the murder of Henry Endicott?"

"Yes, sir."

"A foul murder it war."

"Yes, whether Ross-grove did it or not."

"Ah! then you have doubts, Mr. Graves?"

"I certainly have, Kit, but then it may be but natural since John Ross-grove's wife and mine—both now dead—were sisters."

"Horn o' Joshua! is that possible?"

"Yes; and what is more, Bandy, that innocent girl in yonder bower is the daughter of John Ross-grove."

"Confusion o' Babel!" exclaimed Kit.

"Rosycrusians!" added Rattler.

"It is a fact," Graves went on, and from the beginning, repeated in substance the story that we have heard Ruth narrate to Stonewall Bob. When he had finished Old Kit exclaimed in surprise and astonishment:

"Ram's horn o' Joshua! John Ross-grove the father o' Ruth Graves!—a murderer the father o' such an angel gal!"

"It confuses—paralyzes me," declared Rattler.

"And Israel Danbaugh the cousin—blood relative o' John Ross-grove," Kit went on, "and Danbaugh offering a big reward to us for the capture of Ross-grove that he may be hanged by the neck till dead. Isn't this a little singular?"

"It certainly seems so to me, Kit," replied Rattler, "and if you'd give your majestic intellect rope enough for your great mind to reach out and grasp the few simple facts in the case you might come to some conclusion in the matter."

"That's one thing I've already figgered out," said Kit. "and that is that I don't believe the father of such a gal as that gal Ruth, could be a murderer."

"Second the motion, Kit," exclaimed Rattler; "now what do you say, friend Ruble?"

"Noble and upright men," answered Zeke, "sometimes in the heat of passion have done murder most foul; but in this case the fact of Danbaugh being, as Mr. Graves says, Ross-grove's cousin, his eagerness for the death of Ross-grove certainly throws a shadow of mystery, if not doubt, around the affair."

"That's true, Ruble, and the doubt's in favor of Ross-grove," declared Bandy. "It looks a little queer that Danbaugh concealed from me the fact o' his being a relative o' Ross-grove's and I've half a notion to go back on him and throw up the whole job; for, to tell the truth, I'd rather lose forty big rewards than add one pang o' grief to that child's heart. But, as to that, we will decide after little Gypsy and Sabina has been rescued."

"You spoke once, Kit," said Ruble, "of an old pard of yours, named Ichabod Flea, that had gone as a spy among the outlaws and renegade Indians. Was he to have met us here?"

"Yes, if he could do so conveniently," answered Bandy.

Something very much like a chuckling laugh escaped Rattler's lips, but he at once turned it off by asking:

"I wonder what Stonewall thinks o' this Danbaugh-Ross-grove affair?"

"Just about as the rest of you do," answered Graves.

"Well, by the horn o' Joshua! this puzzles me—breaks me all up. How does it affect you, Rattler? speak out and give the world the benefit o' your gigantic intellect—help a man outen a muddle, can't ye?"

"Well, I'm o' the opinion that Israel Danbaugh is makin' a hull mess o' fools outen somebody, and it begins to look as though those fools are Kit Bandy, the great, wall-eyed, mountain detective."

"Well," said Bandy, "I'm going to sift the thing to the very bottom. If Ross-grove is among the outlaws I want to know it; and at the same time there are other things I want to understand—things that's come up in my mind the last hour. One of them is—if Ross-grove *living* is in Danbaugh's way, in any shape or manner, why might not Ross-grove's gal, Ruth, be also? and if she is, what relation does Dan-

baugh's presence in Deadwood bear to the attempted abduction of Ruth—Ruth Rossgrove, as I suppose is her name?"

"Now, Bandy," declared Rattler, rubbing his hands together in apparent glee, "your brain is beginning to work—you're getting to solid business, and if you keep on you'll figger Danbaugh out a criminal, Rossgrove a persecuted man, and yourself a whalin' big mess o' fools."

"That's 'bout the size o' it, Rattler," affirmed Kit. "Some people do blubber out the truth once in awhile, and if we could lift the veil that enshrouds this whole affair, I'm thinkin' we'd find more than Rossgrove needed hangin'. However, let us drop the subject for to-night, and try and get a little rest and sleep, and as soon as Stonewall gets back we can decide on our future course."

To this the others consented, and in a few minutes all were wrapped in slumber except One-Armed Phil and the plucky little Rambling Dan, who remained on guard.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLACK WOLF AND THE WHITE-BUFFALO-CALF. IN a beautiful mountain vale, through which flowed a limpid stream, was located the village of Black Wolf, the Sioux, the destination of Stonewall Bob.

The night had passed and the day was nearly half gone when the Boy Trojan came in sight of the Indian town, and most heartily did he rejoice, for his horse was well-nigh fagged, and hunger, excitement and the loss of two nights' sleep were beginning to tell upon his own robust frame. And yet he almost dreaded to meet the chief, for to meet him was to also meet his daughter, Singing-Bird. It had been less than a year since he had rescued the dusky maiden from the power of a white villain, which act had made him an honored guest in the chief's camp on Grand river, and won, not only the admiration of the girl, but her most passionate love—a feeling that the young plainsman in no way reciprocated. It is true, he had treated her kindly and gallantly, as was his nature, but he had in no way encouraged her in her affection for him. He had not seen nor heard from her, or her father, since they had parted on the Grand river, and now as he approached the village he inwardly hoped that this interim of months had dispelled from the heart of the savage maiden her unrequited love.

The young plainsman's approach was heralded through the town before he had reached its limits, and lazy bucks, greasy squaws, and naked papposes, filled with excitement and curiosity, swarmed along the street by which he entered the village.

The bucks who had met him on the Grand river readily recognized him, and from their lips, and through the town, was shouted the name:

"White-Buffero-Calf! White-Buffero-Calf!"

Bob recognized this friendly greeting with continued bows on the right and the left until he reached the lodge of the chief, who advanced to meet him with a sad smile upon his face.

Dismounting, Bob grasped the Indian's hand and shook it warmly. The youth saw that while Black Wolf seemed glad to see him, he was morose and sad, the cause of which he soon learned.

Two bucks were on hand to take charge of Bob's horse, while the youth himself was conducted into the chief's apartments and seated. Then water, and bread, and meat, was brought him, for his very looks told the Indian that he was thirsty and hungry; and never did food taste better to the Boy Trojan than that ash-bread and broiled meat.

Black Wolf was silent until he had finished his repast; then he opened the conversation by saying: "Black Wolf has looked long for the coming of the White-Buffero-Calf."

"And I have been anxious to visit the Sioux village," replied Bob; "but why is the chief's daughter, Singing-Bird, not here?"

"The spirit of Singing-Bird has gone to the land of the spirits," Black Wolf answered, with a sad voice, as he searched the eyes of the Boy Trojan as if for evidence of sorrow.

Nor was he disappointed. A sigh escaped the great-hearted boy's lips, for the sad news was a startling shock to him, and he felt a pang in his breast akin to remorse for the hope he had expressed before entering the village.

Stonewall expressed the greatest sympathy for the bereaved savage father, and every word came from the heart, too, for there was no deceit in the breast of Bob Comstock.

It was some time before a favorable opportunity was offered for the Boy Trojan to make known the object of his visit there without obtruding upon the feelings of the chief, who persisted in recounting all the tender memories of his dead child. However, in answer to a question, he was finally enabled to make this answer:

"I have come to consult with Black Wolf. There are many bad white men in the hills and many more bad Indians, and they have carried off two pale-face squaws. My white friends are few, while the enemies are many."

A look of evident pain passed over the chief's face as he replied:

"Black Wolf knows that many of his warriors broke away and went to the hills; but they are not the only bad Indians there. The Pawnees, the Crows, the Cheyennes and the Blackfeet have many outlaw warriors there helping the bad pale-faces to kill and rob and burn. It is their crimes that make the Great Father at Washington angry with all the Indians, and then he sends his soldiers to punish them or he withholds our annuities. But Black Wolf cannot help there being bad Indians any more than the Great Father can help there being bad pale-faces."

"That is all very true, Black Wolf," affirmed Stonewall, "but when we found we could not rescue our white friends from the foe, one of my friends said, 'Go for the soldiers,' but I said, 'No, I will go to the village of Black Wolf and he will send warriors to help us for he never forgets a friend and a kindness, and besides, his warriors can fight in the hills better than the soldiers.'"

The chief was flattered by the young plainsman's words. Bob had adroitly presented his case, and that too, in a way that almost precluded a refusal on the part of the chief to comply with his request. He had, with some diplomatic shrewdness, placed

Black Wolf upon his honor, and while the wily old chief did not fail to discern the young plainsman's tact, he fully appreciated the compliment paid his savage honor, and, with brightening eyes and breast swelling with pride, he answered:

"The White-Buffero-Calf speaks like a white-haired counselor. He is deep in his mind as the still waters in the river. He is strong as the whirlwind, and bold as the lion. Black Wolf has not forgotten the young pale-face's bravery. The spirit of Singing-Bird whispers to me in the wind and the trees the praises of White-Buffero-Calf whom she loved. Her spirit calls on me now to send warriors to the help of the pale-face. I will summon Standing-Elk, my bravest war-chief, and bid him prepare for the war-path at once."

A messenger was at once dispatched for Standing-Elk, who received his instructions from the chief, and soon the whole town was alive with bustle and excitement.

The Indians were to go to the scene of war on foot, taking the short cut through the hills, and as Stonewall would not tarry there he was furnished a fresh horse, his own being too near exhausted to make the trip. As the way the Indians were going was impassable for a horse he would have to return as he had come, alone; but as the red-skins' route was much the shortest they would be enabled to reach the appointed place of meeting on the Moreau almost as soon as he.

The war-party of some sixty braves left the town before Stonewall did, in high spirits over the prospect of gratifying their natural thirst for human scalps, even though they were to come from the heads of their own race.

The sun was on a downward course when Stonewall Bob bid the chief good-by, and mounting his horse rode away from the dirty, smudgy village where he had been an honored guest. The horse that he had been provided with was the best at the chief's command, and proved as good, if not better, than the one that had carried him to the town. He sped along at a steady gallop, and his mind was so occupied with thoughts of his friends and their dangers that it was sunset before he was aware of it. But there was no halting for him that night, and he rode on. The twilight shadows deepened into darkness, through which he was compelled to travel at a more cautious gait. He was now following a deep, wooded valley trending away toward the western hills, when he suddenly came in sight of three or four twinkling camp-fires some little distance before him.

Quickly he drew rein, for he knew not but that foes were before him.

He listened and heard the voices of white men, and then a peal of rollicking laughter.

Riding on, he had gained a point within a few rods of the fire when he was challenged. At the same moment he discovered that a party of United States cavalry was encamped there, and giving his name he was permitted to enter the lines.

Riding into camp, he dismounted and saluted the soldiers.

A man wearing the insignia of a captain advanced and, with a look of surprise upon his face, addressed the young plainsman.

"Sir, whom have I the pleasure of addressing?" he asked.

"Bob Comstock," was the young man's response.

"By Jove! that must be Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan," said a man in a civilian's suit, the fashion of which was not of the border.

"That's who I am, sir," Bob responded.

"Indeed?" exclaimed the officer, extending his hand. "I'm truly glad to meet you, Stonewall, for I have heard of you frequently. I am Captain Rainbolt, and this gentleman is Doctor Powell, the—"

"The Surgeon Scout?" exclaimed Stonewall.

"Yes," answered the doctor, who was dressed in a neat suit of buckskin. "I am like yourself, Bob, got a name for every locality I strike."

"Well, doctor," returned Bob, "if reports are true, you deserve every good name indicative of skill and bravery that's been tacked onto you, and since we've met I'm of the opinion you deserve them all, if one can judge anything by appearances, and I think I can sometimes."

"Compliments from everybody are not flattering to me, but from Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan, I accept them most gratefully. Permit me, Bob, to introduce to you this gentleman, Israel Danbaugh."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PINKERTON DETECTIVE INTERVIEWS BOB. STONEWALL BOB started at mention of Israel Danbaugh's name, and although he had noticed the man before—for it was he who had first spoke Bob's name—a feeling of repulsion filled his breast. The man's very face, his voice, and the touch of his hand, which seemed cold and clammy, like a snake's body, all conspired to add to the involuntary dislike the name had engendered.

Even after the youth had had time for reflection, and he had endeavored to convince himself that his feelings toward Danbaugh were unjust—the result of prejudice growing out of the man's pursuit of John Rossgrove, the father of Ruth, he could not change his first impression.

Danbaugh was a tall, well-preserved man of perhaps fifty years. He wore long, silken chin-whiskers. His upper lip was smoothly shaven. He had dark-gray eyes that were not possessed of any remarkable brilliancy, yet they seemed half-closed in a smile. His manners were easy, pleasant, and gentlemanly; but for all this Bob could not overcome his dislike of the man.

"Stonewall Bob," Danbaugh said, as he shook the youth's hand, "I heard that noted old mountaineer, Kit Bandy, speak of you. I am glad to meet you, and here is my friend, Austin Smith. Mr. Smith is from Chicago, and one of Pinkerton's best detectives."

The young plainsman and the detective shook hands. Bob's feelings toward Smith were not the same as toward Danbaugh, yet there was a coldness in his breast even toward the detective, which went to show the strength of the boy's love for Ruth, since everything and everybody that seemed against her directly or indirectly, engendered his dislike and stirred up a feeling of bitterness within him. He knew without the telling that Smith was there in the employ of Danbaugh, who was too impatient to await the result of Bandy's expedition in hunting

Rossgrove down, but must take the field himself in person, aided by the Government troops and led by the Surgeon Scout. He felt no bitterness toward the soldiers. He was satisfied that they knew no more of certain facts in the case than he and Bandy themselves did when they set out on the expedition. And it was only by accident that he had been led to change his mind, somewhat—not alone, however, as to Rossgrove's guilt, for of that he knew nothing, but as to the motive that inspired Danbaugh to hunt down his relative and give him over to the hangman.

"I hardly expected to meet you here, Bob," Danbaugh said, "for I supposed you were with Bandy's party."

"I left Bandy's party last night, and I am now on my way back," replied Bob.

"What success have you had?"

"Very poor indeed. We have been kept busy fighting outlaws and outlaw Indians whose numbers are so much larger than ours that I had to go to Black Wolf for help."

"You don't tell me?" exclaimed Captain Rainbolt.

"Did you succeed in getting help from Black Wolf?" asked Austin Smith.

"He at once sent three-score warriors to the scene of action."

"And where is that scene, Bob?" asked the captain.

"It has been upon and around a place called the Hermit Dome, but it will now be transferred to the mountains."

"I know exactly where the Hermit Dome is," said the Surgeon Scout; "Old Fenwick's Cave is near there."

"Then Bandy's determined on having my man, Rossgrove?" observed Danbaugh, but the words caused Bob's brow to contract with a feeling of disgust; still, repressing his feelings he said:

"We've all had something else to do than hunt for criminals in trying to save our own scalps, and rescue a young girl that is in the enemy's power."

"Thunder and Mars!" exclaimed Rainbolt, "is it possible that the red and white outlaws are even carrying off women under our very noses? Who is the captive? and where was she taken from?"

"She's the daughter of a hermit hunter that lives in the hills away over toward the mines."

"I know of no hunter over that way," said the Surgeon Scout, "except Zeke Ruble, and he has no daughter."

"There's where you're mistaken, doctor," replied Stonewall, "for it is Zeke's daughter that's in the power of the foe. Yes, and they also have Kit Bandy's wife."

"Kit Bandy's wife?" exclaimed the doctor; "who ever knew he had a wife? Well, here's a double surprise. I always thought Ruble was one of those quiet, secluded sort of men that preferred his own company to that of others; but if he has a daughter he's been afraid to let it be known to his best friends, and I don't blame him. She would have been carried off by some villain long before, had her presence been known—especially if she's pretty."

"Well, she is—she's a little wild-eyed beauty," said Bob.

"It's an outrage!" exclaimed the Surgeon Scout, his manly dignity rising within him, "to think a more aggressive policy is not pursued against those human vultures. A woman is not safe in this country unless surrounded by regiments of friends, and the white villains are worse than the red savages."

Stonewall was on the point of making known the attack on Mahlon Graves's train and the capture of Ruth, but the presence of Danbaugh changed his mind.

After some further conversation Bob was invited to share the soldiers' bivouac with them, but this he declined, saying:

"I must reach my friends before daylight."

"If our horses were not so near jaded, I would be tempted to break camp and go on with you," said the captain.

"Then that is your destination?" said Stonewall.

"Yes."

"I was afraid," spoke up Danbaugh, as if he seemed to think he owed an apology for enlisting other help in the work he had intrusted to Bandy's party, "that Bandy's force might not be able to cope with the outlaws, and upon learning the soldiers were coming into the hills on a tour of inspection, I enlisted them in my cause, which is their cause so far as hunting down outlaws is concerned."

"I assure you, captain," said Bob, turning to the officer as though in contempt of what Danbaugh had said, "that your assistance will be timely, and we shall look for you along some time to-morrow."

With this the young plainsman vaulted into his saddle, touched his hat and rode away.

Passing the guard, he rode at a walk on up the valley. When about twenty rods from camp his ears were greeted by the familiar words:

"Oh, Bob!"

The young man drew rein, and in a low tone asked:

"Who calls me?"

"I, Austin Smith," was the answer, and the next moment the detective stood at the side of his horse. "Dismount, Bob, please," he went on, "for I've a word to speak with you."

Wondering what he could have to say, Bob dismounted.

"Let's move on a little further from camp, now," Smith said, taking Bob by the arm.

The two walked on fifty yards further and stopped, when Smith said:

"Bob, I've the reputation of being a detective by nature as well as by practice. I have made human nature a study these twenty years, and I think I can read most men pretty well, and your opinion of Israel Danbaugh seems very clear to my mind."

Bob was completely taken by surprise. He did not suppose his dislike of Danbaugh had been so plainly shown, and before he could frame a reply to Smith's declaration the detective continued:

"Now, you must have some reason for your distrust of Mr. Danbaugh."

"You take a fellow rather abruptly, Smith," Stonewall said; "but then I have no desire or intention of denying the truth of what you discovered in my feelings toward that man; and furthermore, as you are in his employ, I have no desire to give you my

reasons for disliking him. You'll discover that in time, no doubt."

"Young man, I'm a detective," said Smith, "and that Endicott murder has been in my hands for years. Somebody committed the crime, that's sure."

"Then you must have some doubts of Rossgrove having done the deed," replied Bob.

"I didn't say so, did I?"

"No, but you intimate as much. But then I don't care what Danbaugh or any one thinks of me or my opinion, because it *does* look singular to me that a man would be so eager for the death of a blood relative as to offer a fortune for his capture."

"Ah! that's—that's the sticking-point with you, eh?"

"That's *one* of them," answered Bob.

"And the other?" obsequiously.

"That's my secret," responded Stonewall, not to be caught by the detective's shrewdness.

Smith laughed in a silent way.

"Why, boy," he said, "I can tell you why Danbaugh wishes Rossgrove's capture. It's no secret to me, nor need he be ashamed of it, in one sense. In England, or Scotland, I forget which, there's a fortune of a whole big million of dollars that Rossgrove's heir to. In case of his death it goes to his coz, Israel Danbaugh, d'ye see? Now, if Rossgrove's captured, he's good as dead, and then Israel gets the wealth. That's all there is of it. The fortune's doing Rossgrove no good, and as the bequest is so made that his issue cannot inherit it if Rossgrove is dead, and Danbaugh alive, why, it'd do his child no good."

"Then Rossgrove has a child?" observed Bob.

"They say so—a girl somewhere East—now a young lady of seventeen or eighteen."

"And in case of her father's death she would not stand between the fortune and Danbaugh?"

"I understand she would not, though she might give him a deal of trouble."

"Has Danbaugh ever expressed any fears from that source?"

"He's talked about it."

"How long after the murder of Endicott was it before a knowledge of the inheritance awaiting a claimant was discovered?" questioned Stonewall.

"Two years, or thereabouts," answered Smith, "so you cannot say that Rossgrove, out of an exuberance of spirit over his great inheritance killed Endicott. But if Danbaugh had slain Rossgrove, then we might suspect that he—Danbaugh—had had a previous knowledge of the fortune and the conditions of the will."

"That's very true, Mr. Smith," replied Stonewall, in a voice that indicated some impatience, "but if you have been a detective twenty years you know, or ought to, that there's more ways than one of *killing a man*."

"Zip!" exclaimed the detective, slapping the young plainsman on the shoulder, "you've the instincts of a detective, Stonewall. I understand you now pretty well, and have no more to say, only that I do believe you know more than I can pump out of you. But it's all right; I think we'll understand each other perfectly before many weeks roll around. Now let me repeat again that I'm working up the Endicott murder for all there is in it, and not for fortunes in Europe. I hope you'll succeed in rescuing the hermit hunter's daughter, and Kit Bandy's wife, and capture the whole outlaw gang—including the notorious Rossgrove. Good night, Bob."

And before Stonewall could reply the detective was gone.

Mounting his horse the young man rode on, and a hundred times during that lonely ride he repeated over and over the words of Austin Smith, and in his mind wondered what revelations the future would develop.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SABINA BANDY GETS IN HER WORK.

DAYLIGHT found the allied forces of Captain Vulture and Turtle-Face many miles from the Hermit Dome encamped in a deep mountain valley, sparsely wooded with pine and cedar. Here they had resolved to remain until assured that Bandy and his friends intended to follow them, scouts having been left behind to watch the movements of the plainsmen, and report the same.

Meanwhile, Old Sabina Bandy was making it exceedingly interesting for her captors with a constant stream of tongue-lashings, but the only effect it had was to provoke the outlaws to laughter, which in turn fed the fire of her wrath.

Gypsy, after her recapture, had become somewhat despondent and irritable, but after her captors had gone into camp in the mountain valley, and arranged a commodious tent for her and Sabina, she laid down and went to sleep, Sabina sitting by her side through the entire night—listening and watching like a cat to learn the intentions of the foe.

In the morning, when the maiden arose from her sleep, she felt refreshed, and after having bathed her hands and face at a little stream flowing through the valley, eaten a few bites of broiled meat and dry bread, she and Sabina strolled off up the valley a short way, they having been given the freedom of the camp in that direction, though they were not to go beyond the guards stationed some forty rods from the encampment.

When out of hearing of their captors they sat down and entered into conversation, but they had talked but a few minutes when they were invited, or rather ordered, to return to camp at once. When they reached there they found their captors were astir, as with some new excitement.

"Well, my dears," said Captain Vulture, with an affected smile of pleasure upon his red, fluffy face, "I guess we'll mount our horses and move along. You look much refreshed, Mrs. Bandy, this morning—you don't look to be a day over six—teen."

"Tyrant! villain!" retorted Sabina, "don't provoke me to further anger, by addin' insult to injury. Please gracious! man, if I set them fingers in your eyes the rest of your days will be spent in gropin' blindness. Don't forget that I'm the lawfully wedded wife of Kit Bandy, and he'll make you smoke, if ever he lays hands upon you, so be will."

"Mrs. Bandy," said the outlaw chief, "Jack Bramble, there, has fallen in love with you, and I'm going to see you get a divorce from ugly Old Kit, so's he can lawfully wed you."

"Wed me?" shrieked Sabina, with virtuous indig-

nation. "Never! I'll plunge a dagger to my flutterin' heart and become the bride of death before I'll submit to be that villain's wife!"

"Well, at any rate," said Captain Vulture, "Bramble will be your escort to our romantic retreat away back in the hills, and the more spirited you are the happier will be our ride. Boys, bring up the horses."

Four horses bridled and saddled were led into camp. Gypsy was placed upon the back of one of them, and Sabina quietly submitted to be assisted to the back of another. Then Captain Vulture and Bramble mounted the other two, and the four rode off up the valley, the outlaw captain at Gypsy's side and Bramble at Sabina's. They were followed by two mounted outlaws that had been too badly injured to take part in the contemplated massacre of Bandy's party; and these in turn were followed by four slightly wounded Indians and outlaws with the horses and outfit belonging to the party.

Then those left behind secreted themselves among the bushes and rocks on either side of the narrow vale, for their scouts had brought the word that the plainsmen were advancing but a short distance away, along the pass.

No sooner was Captain Vulture out of sight of camp than he became uneasy, although he felt assured before starting that the way before him was clear. He urged on his and Gypsy's horse at a gallop. Bramble and Sabina followed close behind, but the wounded men were unable to ride out of a walk.

After moving along at this rate for a mile or two, Old Sabina suddenly shrieked out:

"Oh, Lord! I can never stand it to ride so hard! I've got a murderin' stitch in my side now—oh! catch me!"

She gave her rein a violent jerk that brought her horse almost to a stop, and the next instant she gave herself a fling and landed full length upon the ground.

Bramble burst into a roar of laughter as he drew rein, while Captain Vulture, checking up, turned and came riding back cursing like a pirate.

"Shoot the old hyena!" he roared, with an oath, "if she's going to cut those kind of hysterical capers."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth before Sabina sprung to her feet, and with a single motion she extended both her arms—one toward Bramble, and the other toward Captain Vulture. In each hand she clutched a little derringer that she had fished out from some unknown hiding-place in her garments, and, as one, the two weapons rung out with a vicious "spang," starting a hundred echoes ringing through the hills.

Without even as much as a groan Captain Vulture dropped his hands at his side, his head fell back, and reeling in his saddle he fell heavily to the earth shot through the heart, while Bramble, with a groan and a curse, jerked his horse most violently, and then, in his frantic endeavors to keep his saddle, dug his roweled heels into the animal's side with such cruelty that the tortured beast lunged forward and dashed madly away down the valley, its wounded rider swaying to and fro in the saddle—the hot blood pouring from a terrible wound in his breast.

But grandly as Sabina had done in liberating herself from the power of the outlaws, her daring deed did not relieve Gypsy of her danger. The horse the maiden rode was a spirited one and, frightened by the crack of the derringers and the fall of Vulture's body, it also dashed down the valley at lightning speed carrying the shrieking girl back, for the second time, into the very midst of her enemies.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BLOODY CONFLICT.

The reader who has followed with us the fortunes of Kit Bandy heretofore, has doubtless been aware of the fact that Sabina Bandy was no woman at all, but the irrepressible Ichabod Flea, the inseparable friend and companion of Old Kit—a shrewd and daring man and skillful detective whose work was largely done in the disguise of a female character, which a beardless face, rather delicate features, and a decidedly female voice enabled him to personate as a vindictive old wife to perfection. Not one of Kit's present party knew that Sabina Bandy was Ichabod Flea except Old Rattler. It is true, Bandy had told them all of his friend Ichabod who had gone into the hills as a spy, but he had kept a secret the fact that he had gone there in the character of a female.

The two wounded outlaws following behind Captain Vulture and Jack Bramble were about three hundred yards away when Sabina fired the two deadly shots that unhorsed the outlaw chief and seriously wounded the other, and heedless of danger to themselves from the same source they urged their horses forward, despite their wounds, in hopes of being able to assist their fallen leader. But Sabina, or Ichabod Flea, as we will know this character hereafter, turned aside, and lifting the heavy revolvers from the freebooter's belt, opened fire at long range on the advancing outlaws.

No close did the bullets whistle around them that they became alarmed and drew rein. A fifth shot from the supposed female's revolver struck one of them on the knee, causing him to fairly scream with agony, and the next moment the two were beating an inglorious retreat down the valley.

In the mean time, Gypsy's horse was carrying her down the vale at a frightful speed. The efforts of the child to check the maddened beast only served to increase its speed. Down past the outlaws that were bringing away the horses and plunder of the band, it flew—on past where lay the writhing form of Bramble, who had fallen from his horse, and still on toward the now deserted camp of the allies it sped.

The Indians and outlaws that were concealed among the bushes and rocks awaiting the coming of the herdsmen, had heard the report of the pistols up the valley, and in dread suspense they awaited for the meaning of it.

The riderless horse of Jack Bramble suddenly burst into their view, and close behind it came Gypsy's. This told them something had gone wrong, and seeing the maiden's horse was running away with her, they rushed from their concealment and throwing themselves before the mad beast, endeavored to stop it.

But the frantic horse heeded them not, and plunging through their ranks tore on madly down the valley.

A hundred yards further on, a huge form suddenly leaped from the bushes before the horse. It was the form of Stonewall Bob, and at sight of him the savages gave a demoniac yell and dashed off in pursuit of the daring foe.

With a bound like that of a panther the Boy Trojan sprung at the flying horse as it came up. With his right hand he seized the animal by the mane and with the left the reins, and at the same instant he was jerked off his feet and dragged along by the frantic beast; but with a grip like that of a vise he clung to the mane and finally succeeded in giving the reins a quick pull that partially checked the animal, but the bit was snapped in two by the jerk and the bridle torn from the head of the horse, which, instantly taking advantage of this freedom, again bounded away.

But Stonewall Bob was not to be thus defeated, and before the beast was in full speed he threw his left hand forward and seized it by the nose. Then, with a quick and almost superhuman effort, he gave its head a sudden wrench that flung it and its rider violently to the earth, the Boy Trojan going down with them.

But in an instant Stonewall was upon his feet. To his horror he saw Gypsy lying prone upon the earth dead or unconscious, while not over fifty yards away came two-score of infuriated savages.

The situation was indeed critical, but the heroic boy did not lose his presence of mind for a moment, and stooping he lifted the inanimate form of the girl in his strong arms and bounded away—his hair flying, his head bare, and the perspiration bursting in great beads from every pore in his face.

The savages began firing upon him. The bullets whistled closely around him, and to avert these he swung aside and entered the undergrowth that skirted the base of the hillside.

On dashed the yelling savages, sure now of the scalp of the Boy Trojan. But suddenly four men, led by Kit Bandy, burst from cover of the bushes and confronted them. It was a small band to confront such fearful odds, but it was a Spartan band, and the next instant a fearful hand-to-hand contest was raging.

Stonewall Bob laid down his barden and returned to the assistance of his friends. At the same time Old Rattler, Ichabod Flea, and rambling Dan came hurrying to the scene of action from up the valley, while over the hill from the north, with a war-whoop that resounded for miles, came the warriors of Black-Wolf.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SCENE OF DEATH.

THE sudden appearance of Black-Wolf's warriors was hailed with a shout of joy by the outlaws and their red friends, for they believed they were coming to their aid, and not until the Sioux were upon the field dealing death to the allied forces of outlaws did they see their fatal mistake and attempt to flee.

Like frightened sheep they scattered at the sound of Turtle-Face's warning cry and fled in every direction that offered an avenue of escape pursued by the victorious warriors of Standing-Bill.

Some attempted escape by scaling the steep hill-sides, but these Old Rattler and Rambling Dan easily picked off with their unerring rifles.

More than a score of dead, dying and wounded lay in almost a heap where the battle had raged the fiercest, and it was with a feeling of sickening horror that Stonewall Bob, who had come out of the contest unscathed, saw half of his friends lying in the heap. Bandy, Graves, Ruble and Jackson were down, and Old Kit was the only one that showed any signs of remaining life.

"Great God! Rattler, half of our friends are killed!" the youth exclaimed.

"It war a bloody fight while it lasted," said Rattler.

A groan escaped Kit Bandy's lips. The old man rose to a sitting posture and glared around him like one suddenly awakening in the dark.

"Bandy, old pard, are you hurt?"

"That's your voice, Rattler, arn't it? Did we whip? Is the gal safe? What be I, Rattler?" the old detective asked in bewilderment.

Stonewall assisted the old man from among the dead and seated him at one side, answering his questions as he did so.

A glance at Jackson told that he was dead. Ruble's body was dragged from the heap of corpses and laid out upon the ground to all appearances dead. Mahlon Graves moaned feebly and then his friends gave their attention to him.

"Where is Gypsy?" asked One-Armed Phil, gazing about him, his thoughts ever upon his little sister.

"I left her in yonder thicket either dead or unconscious, I know not which, from the fall of her horse," answered Bob.

And bounding away across the valley, he entered the shrubbery and soon returned bearing the inanimate form of the girl in his arms.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, joyfully; "she's coming to!"

Bob laid her upon a blanket and One-Armed Phil, falling upon his knees at her side, kissed her brow repeatedly, crying out:

"Oh, my darling, baby sister! May God spare you to me!"

To still add to the excitement of the moment the thunder of horses' hoofs suddenly broke upon the ears of the party, and the next moment the troopers under Captain Rainbolt came in sight at a sweeping gallop.

"Thank God!" cried Stonewall, "the Surgeon Scout is with them, and he may be able to save our friends."

In a very few seconds of time the soldiers had drawn rein a few rods away, and Captain Rainbolt, throwing himself from his saddle, rushed forward, exclaiming:

"Great heavens! we are too late after all, Stonewall!"

"The fight's over, and, thanks to the Sioux, we annihilated the allied foes. But it cost us fearfully," replied the Boy Trojan; "but, doctor," he said to the Surgeon Scout, who came up at this juncture, "there is heroic work for you."

"I see the form of a woman there," said the doctor, whose quick eye had taken in the situation; "is she dead?"

"Only stunned, I think, from the fall of her horse."

Without another word the doctor advanced and stooping over the girl looked into her fair face and examined her pulse.

"No, she's not dead," he said, "and will doubtless recover soon, if there are no internal injuries."

Then the doctor turned and requested the nearest soldier to bring his saddle bags, in which he carried his surgical implements and medicines.

"This is Zeke Ruble, isn't it?" the doctor said, as he stepped over to where the hunter lay and gazed down into his face.

"Yes, and I'm afraid he's gone clean under," said Rattler, sadly.

The Surgeon Scout knelt by the body, and after a hasty examination he said:

"No, he's not dead, but in a terrible bad fix. He's been shot through the right shoulder, and received a frightful blow on the head. He's unconscious from that blow, and if inflammation of the brain doesn't set in he might stand one chance in three of pulling through. But here is another bad case," and he arose and walked over to the side of Mahlon Graves, whose breast was saturated with blood.

With his knife the surgeon cut open Graves's clothing and laid bare his breast, in which was a bullet-hole near the left nipple.

At sight of it the doctor shook his head, and the look upon his face spoke plainer than words.

"This is a very hopeless case," he said, "and needs my first care."

Then he proceeded to probe the wound, which he did with skill and dispatch, for he was a veteran surgeon, and in the treatment of gun-shot wounds he was without a peer among army surgeons. He was well prepared for just such cases, as were now before him. In fact, he had come prepared, for he knew that if his skill was needed at all it would be upon the battle-field.

There was abundance of pure water near, that was brought in canteens for the surgeon's use; and, fortunately, the clothing the outlaws had taken from Ruth's trunk was found on the back of a pony captured in the valley, and a portion of it served a good purpose in bandaging the wounds of the injured man.

Ishabod Flea, who had removed his female garments and appeared in a rather suggestive suit of gray flannel pants and shirt, with his long hair still arted in the middle and done up in a knot at the back of his head, gave his attention to his friend Wandy. He found the old man's only injuries were upon the head, which he at once washed and dressed with no little skill; and in a short time Kit began to improve, and when he had so far recovered his senses as to be able to recognize his friends and the situation, he said:

"Boys, I'll git around after awhile."

But the Surgeon Scout had finished dressing Graves's wound, Stonewall took Captain Rainbolt aside and said:

"Captain, that man's daughter is concealed about two miles from here awaiting our return. Don't you think she ought to be brought here at once?"

"I certainly do," answered the officer, "for I'm afraid that man cannot last long, and his daughter should see him while he is rational."

"Then I will go at once," said Bob.

"I will give you an escort of men," the captain added.

"Thank you, captain," replied the youth, and soon he and ten soldiers, with an extra horse for Ruth, were off down the valley.

By the time the doctor had reached Ruble and finished dressing his wound the Hunter had so far recovered as to be able to speak, but he took little notice of things around him.

"Now," said the surgeon, when he had finished dressing Zeke's wound, "if there are no more of our friends needing attention I will do what I can for the enemy's wounded."

"What?" exclaimed Israel Danbaugh, who all the while had stood around a silent spectator. "You're not going to doctor the enemy, are you, Powell?"

"Why not?" asked the doctor.

"Cure them up so's they can butcher more innocent people?" Danbaugh answered.

"I claim to be possessed of some of the elements of Christian humanity, sir," the surgeon said, in a tone of scathing rebuke that brought the color to the face of Danbaugh.

There were two wounded outlaws and four Indians that received the care of the great-hearted doctor, though some of them he knew could not live long. Then three more Indians were brought down from the hillside, and an outlaw was carried in from up the valley. The latter was the notorious Jack Bramble, who was still alive in spite of Ishabod Flea's bullet in the shoulder, and another injury sustained when he fell from his horse. His face was covered with blood and his hair a perfect crust of coagulated gore. But this the doctor washed away, and having bandaged his head gave his attention to his other wounds.

"Another bad case," the doctor said, as he probed the wound; "a little worse than Ruble's."

"Cut my throat, stranger," said Bramble, with a groan and a curse, "and end my misery. I'd rather be a dead outlaw than a livin' prison-bird with a lung and kidney shot off."

"Don't worry, old man," said the surgeon; "I'll care for you now and let you and the future have it out."

With Bramble the doctor's work was finished for the time being, though he knew the worst was yet to come.

Gypsy had fully recovered from her shock and had seated herself by her foster-father, Zeke Ruble, whose every breath she watched with painful anxiety, while One-Armed Phil stood near, feasting his eyes upon her sweet young face and living over in memory his boyhood days. He had said nothing to Gypsy of their relations to each other, and he mentally prayed for the recovery of Ruble that from his lips she might learn the truth of his being her own brother.

A little ripple of excitement was suddenly created by the discovery of Stonewall Bob's approach with Ruth Graves.

A short distance from the camp the party drew rein and dismounted, and then the maiden, leaning upon the Boy Trojan's arm, was conducted toward where her father lay.

Stonewall had already told her of her father being wounded, and she knew well enough by his manners that he was worse than the young plainsman would admit.

Ruth's face in its white grief had lost none of its charms, and as she walked along past the assembled throng, her eyes cast downward and her white lips quivering in sorrow, the soldiers bared their heads in silence, for there was something in her queenly beauty and silent grief that touched their hearts and commanded the civilities that true manhood is ever wont to pay to that which is the most sacred of all God's gifts, pure and innocent womanhood.

When Ruth's eyes met those of her prostrate father a cry of grief burst from her lips, and dropping upon her knees, she threw her arms about his neck and sobbed in silence.

Stonewall Bob turned and walked away, his own heart deeply grieved by the maiden's suffering.

"Robert," a voice suddenly said to him, and a hand touched his arm.

Bob looked around and saw Austin Smith at his side.

"You'll pardon my interruption, I hope," the detective said, "but you did not tell me, Robert, last night, that two maidens had been captured by the outlaws."

"I don't tell everything I know," Bob replied, with a grim smile.

"That's all right, Robert," Smith said. "I don't blame you for that, for too much language sometimes spoils an argument. But may I inquire the name of that wounded man?"

"Mahlon Graves," answered Bob, in a low tone.

"The foster-father and uncle of John Rossgrove's child, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then that lovely girl must be the criminal's daughter."

"She is; she admits it herself."

"Poor child! But isn't it a rather strange coincidence that you should meet the child—a lovely lady too—while hunting down the father?"

"Smith," said Stonewall, "you're a kind of a cold-blooded fellow and are taking some pains to remind me of an unpleasant situation. What do you mean by it?"

Smith chuckled to himself, and said:

"Never mind, Robert; I understand your feelings now. Pardon me," and he turned and walked away.

At this juncture the Surgeon Scout addressed the crowd, saying:

"Men, there must be some work performed right away. It will be weeks and perhaps months before these wounded men can be moved from here, and we must have tents and pallets prepared for them; food must be procured, and, in fact, everything done that will add to their comfort."

So willing hands went to work, and in a short time the blankets and plunder of the defeated outlaws and red-skins had been gathered up. Several blankets were pinned together at their edges with sharpened slivers, thus making covers for several large tents, the framework of which was made of poles laid in forked posts driven into the ground.

When the tents were completed, Mahlon Graves was placed in one of them on a pallet made of grass, leaves and blankets.

Zeke Ruble and Jack Bramble, by the doctor's orders, were placed in another, the wounded Indians in a third, while a fourth was reserved for Ruth and Gypsy.

As soon as Kit Bandy had fully recovered from his blow on the head he held a long, private conversation with Danbaugh, but not one word did he say in regard to Graves or Ruth, for he—Danbaugh—seemed entirely ignorant of whom they were.

Along toward the close of day Zeke Ruble recovered his mind, and when he had learned that Gypsy was safe he felt fully repaid for all he was suffering.

Gypsy and Ruth visited back and forth from one tent to another, and it was noticed that their bright, sweet faces always seemed to carry sunshine to the hearts of the sufferers.

Ruth's kindness proved that she was possessed of the gentle heart of a ministering angel. She hesitated not to hold a cup of water to the parched lips of an outlaw or stranger; and once when she was seated by Ruble's side she passed her soft, cool hand over his hot, scarred brow, and when the gentle touch seemed to reach a hidden well-spring down deep in his heart and his eyes filled with mist, she gently brushed his tears away while her lips moved in prayer.

Once, after both girls had left Ruble and Bramble's tent, the latter complained:

"Damnation, Ruble! if I only had a daughter like yours to sit in and out here like sunshine, I'd never die. But here I lay an old outlaw shot all to thunder and not fit for good worn-grub."

"You didn't have to be an outlaw, Bramble," replied Ruble; "and then, if your career hadn't been checked when it was I would now be childless. Think of it: here you lay receiving water to quench your thirst from the hands of one whose life you would have destroyed!"

"Don't, Ruble; don't poke daggers into me that way. It's hard enough for me to hang here on the edge of the grave with my conscience loaded down with old sins, without havin' my wounds raked open afresh and salt thro' 'em."

"I have no desire to add to your misery, for with your guilty conscience and physical suffering, I doubt not, as you say, that you have enough to bear."

"I don't think I'll ever pull through, Ruble; that doctor says I may, and he's a clever fellow and good surgeon, but what can he do for a blight that's eating up a man's soul?"

"You should have thought of that before you were down on your back, old fellow."

Their conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of Kit Bandy and Israel Danbaugh, who came to pay the wounded men a visit, ostensibly, but more particularly to converse with Jack Bramble.

By this time it was so near dark that the men could not distinguish each other's features in the tent, but Danbaugh, in his usual cold-blooded way, said to the wounded man:

"Well, you're paying dearly for your villainy, aren't you?"

Both Ruble and Bandy noticed that Bramble did not respond to the man at once, and when he finally did it was in a changed voice.

"Yes," was the answer he gave, "but all fellows don't suffer accordin' to their sins."

"That's very true, Bramble," replied Danbaugh, in a more sympathetic tone "but say, I would like to ask you a question."

"Peg away, stranger," replied Bramble, and his voice seemed to grow more husky.

"I am in search of a man who it is said belongs to your band of outlaws," Danbaugh said.

"Lots of fellows are after folks that belong to our band, but old Satan's gettin' most of them; but what's your fellow's make-up?—I mean his description?"

"Well, he is now a man of about forty-five, and when he escaped the law, years ago, he was a slender man, of about medium height—had dark blue eyes, light brown hair, and wore a full beard. Over his right eye was a small scar about half an inch long. His name was John Rossgrove, but what it may be now I can't say."

Bramble was silent for fully a minute, then said:

"I'll think the boys of the band all over between pains, and give you an answer in the morning."

"You may be dead by that time," was the brutal and selfish reply of Danbaugh, and Kit himself was about to reprove him for it, when the man arose, and with a muttered curse left the tent.

After speaking a few words more with Ruble, Kit also left the lodge.

"Say, pard," called out Bramble, in his natural voice again, when they were alone, "did you hear what that fellow said to me?"

"I did, and he's a heartless heathen," replied Ruble.

"He's a darling to talk to me about the wages of sin," Bramble went on, "for do you know, pard, that I know that man like a book?"

"Yes, I do, Bramble," responded Ruble, "and do you know that I know none who you are?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

During the night two of the wounded Indians and one of the outlaws died, but aside from these the others all passed through as comfortable as could have been expected.

In the morning the doctor went the rounds of all his patients and found them doing very well. Dr. Graves was the greatest sufferer, yet with his robust constitution, fair weather, the healthful mountain air and perfect quiet, the doctor thought there was some hope of his recovery.

Old Rattler and Rambling Dan were chosen hunters to procure fresh meat for the camp, and as deer abounded in great numbers in the immediate vicinity the task was easily performed by the skilled hunters; and for the first breakfast they had procured venison enough to feed plainsmen, soldiers and red-skins.

After the sun was an hour high the Surgeon Scout threw open the sides of his patients' tents so that the sun's rays could enter and the balmy breeze kiss the feverish brows of the suffering men.

Zeke Ruble seemed quite cheerful and his face wore a look of decided happiness. Some thought it an ill-omen and others ascribed it to the ministering care and smiles of both Gypsy and Ruth. The doctor didn't know why it was that he should feel so cheerful, and therefore expressed no opinion.

Little Gypsy was also unusually happy, for during the night her kind friend and protector, Zeke Ruble, had revealed to her the fact that the noble-looking young avenger, One-Armed Phil, was her own brother.

Danbaugh did not call on Bramble for his answer, notwithstanding the outlaw was alive with a prospect of recovery.

Along about ten o'clock that day, Kit Bandy, Austin Smith and Stonewall Bob met as if by accident in front of Ruble and Bramble's open tent, and after speaking together a few moments, Kit called Danbaugh up and said:

"Mr. Danbaugh, that's no need o' us all here now, and if we're goin' to hunt up the outlaws den and look further for yer man, Rossgrove, we'd better be about it."

"I am ready, and so is the captain," said Danbaugh.

It was Zeke Ruble who spoke.

"What is it, Zeke?" asked Bandy; "d'ye want to go along?"

"No, I want to save you further," replied the wounded hunter; "you need search no further for that criminal, for I am John Rossgrove!"

"Holy horn o' Joshua!" burst from Old Kit's lips.

"You, John Rossgrove?" cried Danbaugh, fixing a baleful, searching glance upon the face of the prostrate man.

"Good God! men, you'll kill my patients dead!" cried the Surgeon Scout, reprovingly, "why raise this excitement now?"

"Easy, doctor," replied the smooth-tongued Austin Smith; "you're the only man that's raising an excitement. Go take a sedative."

The doctor glanced around him. He saw a smile upon Bandy's face, and that Ruble was perfectly composed; and when he saw Ruth and Gypsy standing near, a look of suspense and joy upon their bright faces, he knew at once that the disclosure made by Ruble had been preconcerted by the detectives, Ruble and the maidens during the quiet hours of the previous night, and without another word he turned and sauntered away, whistling softly to himself.

"Yes, Danbaugh," Ruble now went on, "I'm your cousin, John Rossgrove—the slender, blue-eyed, full-bearded man of years ago. I don't wonder at you not recognizing me, I have changed so. During my wanderings I have lived well and grown rather corpulent. The full beard I prized myself on I mowed off, and that little scar above my eye has disappeared among the many larger ones that adorn my face, and which I have got knocking about in the mountains among Indians, bears and outlaws, and in dodging sheriffs and old detectives. Yes, as a fugitive I've grown stout and rugged, Israel."

"By heavens! it is John Rossgrove!" declared Danbaugh.

"He's been foolin' me most shamefully," said Old

Kit: "I wouldn't treat a hound pup that way. If this gets out it'll ruin my reputation. Jist think o' my hirl's a man to help hunt hisself down!"

"Kitsie, go away, 'way out in the mountains and hurl yourself into a chasm. You're in your dotage—old enough to suicide," said Old Rattler.

"Of course I'm John Rossgrove," declared Ruble, eying Danbaugh like a hawk, "and yonder fair girl is my daughter," and he pointed to Ruth, whose pretty face was aglow with joy.

"How brazen-faced the criminal is," exclaimed Danbaugh, not a little disconcerted by the apparent indifference of the detectives.

"It are a clear conscience he has, Israel." It was Bramble who spoke thus.

"Hullo thar!" exclaimed Rattler; "returns in from another precinct."

"I guess Israel don't recognize me either," Bramble went on, "but then he never seen me with a big whisker on. Come in and shake with an old chum, Israel. I'm nobody on earth but Duke Rosenberg, the feller that shot poor Henry Endicott at Rushville."

"What does that scoundrel mean?" questioned Danbaugh.

"He can answer for hisself," said Bandy.

"You see, Israel," Bramble again said, "you told me last night I might be dead before morning, and so you scared me into making a confession, and by so doin' Ruble and I found out who each other was, and I concluded I'd confess the wrong I did Rossgrove."

"Then you admit killing Endicott," said Austin Smith, "but swore the deed onto Rossgrove, and tried to get him hung, and would have succeeded but for the burning of the jail?"

"Me and a pard named Quilman did the shootin', and then did the swearin' together," answered Bramble.

"For what purpose?" Smith asked.

"Shakels—a thousand of them war promised, but we only got five hundred."

"Who employed you to do that murderous work?"

"Israel Danbaugh, the man who reproved the Surgeon Scout for helpin' us poor wounded devils of outlaws instead of lettin' us die!" exclaimed Bramble a little excited.

"He lies! He's an impostor—a coached impostor of John Rossgrove!" thundered Danbaugh, his face black with rage.

"Easy, Danbaugh," commanded the mild-voiced Smith, "he's down and can't get up. He stands at death's door, and has a right to clear his conscience, though he lives or dies. I think he's done well to keep this secret all these years when he might have tormented your life out for hush-money."

"The fact that he has not is evidence of his falsehood," declared Danbaugh.

"You remember, Israel," Bramble went on, "I had to leave Rushville very sudden—hadn't time to call for the balance due on the Endicott account. You remember the Vigilance Committee waited on me and Quilman and invited us to wait ourselves away from there that night and promised to hang us if we were ever caught in the State. So we went away and drifted out to wicked Denver. Two or three years later, who should we meet there but Jacob Day? Jake, you remember, used to be a leading, wealthy citizen of Rushville, but he got to drinkin' and went down into the gutter, and finally received his death-wound from a knife-stab in a row in a Denver saloon. He lay several days before he died, and I stayed right by him like a brother and ministered to his wants. When he seen he was goin', he confessed to me, as I now do to you, Israel, that he was one of the Vigilantes of prominent citizens that turned my star of empire westward, and he said you, Israel, was the leader of the committee. I thought it a mean trick to serve us jist to get rid of payin' us that balance, and I swore I'd git even with you. That was several years ago, and I kept knockin' about—was four years a student in the Nebraska State Institoot for takin' a halter with a horse to the end of it—and since then I've been too busy with other affairs to give my attention to you, Israel. And now here I be, a pretty spectacle for wolves and worms. But when I recognized you last night I concluded to let you carry the load I had for awhile, and besides give John Rossgrove a rest from dodgin' detectives. That's all, Israel."

"Then, sir," spoke up the Surgeon Scout, in a mild tone of authority, "I want you to give your tongue a rest or you'll talk yourself to death."

"All right, doctor," and a look of relief passed over the outlaw's pain-pinched face.

Scarcely had these submissive words fallen from the man's lips when the crash of half a score of rifles concealed on the densely-wooded hillside started the silent echoes of the canyon, while a shower of bullets came whistling down through the air, one of them passing close to the head of the Surgeon Scout, and another striking a soldier dead in his tracks.

The enemy, after all, had not been vanquished, and in the fancied security of those in camp the assassin shot came with frightful meaning.

CHAPTER XXX.

RATTLER MAKES A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

THE wildest excitement followed the murderous shots of the concealed foe and a panic would have ensued but for the cool head and steady nerve of the Surgeon Scout.

Quickly Lieutenant Granger called his men into line ready to meet an attack, while Standing Elk, followed by his warriors, dashed away up the wooded hillside to engage the secreted enemy.

The fire of the latter, however, was not repeated, and it soon became evident that they had disappeared. For all this it was some time before quiet could be restored, and even then uneasiness and fear pervaded the camp. But the worst of all—to the rage of Kit Bandy, the mortification of Austin Smith, and the chagrin of the entire camp—it was found, after quiet had been restored, that Israel Danbaugh had disappeared! A careful search around camp failed to produce him. He had made good his escape during the excitement, and when that fact was assured, beyond question, Jack Bramble became greatly excited.

A second and more extended search was then in-

stituted for the villain. In fact, nearly two days were spent by hunters, soldiers and Indians hunting for him, but without avail.

More than Jack Bramble were exercised over the fellow's escape, and John Rossgrove was one of them. Knowing the man's true character now, he realized that his life would still be in danger as long as the scoundrel was at large.

Under the skillful treatment of the Surgeon Scout, however, Jack Bramble, and others of the wounded, continued to improve slowly; but while this was true, the doctor informed them that it would be some time before they could be removed, and even then an ambulance would have to be brought up from the fort.

In the mean time, Rambling Dan and One-armed Phil, as stated, had been dispatched to the hidden home of Zeke Ruble to conduct Margery Ashton—the settler's daughter he had rescued at the time he did little Gypsy—to the bedside of her benefactor.

Rambling Dan knew where the hunter's home was located for, since the death of Zeke's old friend Sandy, the youth had been a frequent and welcome visitor there; and yet he had, by Ruble's desire, kept secret the place of the hunter's home and the treasures it contained.

Five days had been considered sufficient time in which to make the round trip, barring accidents or unavoidable delays.

As Danbaugh could not be found and the hostile Indians and outlaws seemed to have all vanished from the surrounding country. Standing Elk and his warriors bid "Camp Kit Bandy" good-by and returned to their village with the scalps of many of their enemies at their girdles. All the soldiers, except the Surgeon Scout, and ten men under Lieutenant Granger, departed also. Even this guard, some thought, would not be necessary for the safety of the camp, for it was not likely the enemy would return again.

It appeared to all as though the attack had been made solely to afford Danbaugh an opportunity for escape, for, had it been delayed two minutes longer, the great camp would have been in irons.

As the days passed the escape of Danbaugh became a matter of less consequence than the expected coming of Rambling Dan and One-Armed Phil with Miss Ashton. The five days given for the trip were up, and when the sixth passed and they came not, John Rossgrove grew exceedingly uneasy. His friends endeavored to allay his fears, for he was yet in no condition to undergo much excitement.

Old Rattler and Kit Bandy now held a consultation, and it was decided that Tom should make some investigation into the matter.

"I regret, Thomas," Old Kit said, "that I can't go along and take care o' you. Of course, you'll get back with a roarin' Tom Rattler romance if nothin' else."

"Kitsie," responded Old Tom, "as a twister o' truth I long ago s'rendered to you. I awarded you the world's prize years ago, and all you need now is a brass medal. But, old pard, you must be quiet and patient till I git back. A man a hundred years old can't stand everything."

With this admonition Rattler left his friend and departed from camp. He walked briskly away down the defile in the direction of the river, and when about half a mile from camp met Ruth Graves and little Gypsy on horseback, accompanied by a couple of young soldiers, returning from a short ride down the pass.

Stopping them, Tom read the girls a good-natured lecture about venturing so far from camp, even though accompanied by soldiers. All accepted his reproval in good nature, for Old Tom had won a warm place in every heart.

Passing on he had gone less than half a mile further when he heard two shots behind. He stopped and looked back. A turn in the defile concealed all above from his view. He listened but heard nothing, and naturally supposing the shots had been fired by the soldiers—the girls' escort—he moved on.

The hunter knew the exact route by which Dan and Phil were expected to return. They would cross the river at the ford near the Hermit Dome, and toward that point he bent his footsteps.

It was several miles to the ford, and yet it was no walk for the wiry old borderman, and rapidly he passed over the miles. He was not far from the ford—less than an hour's walk—when his attention was suddenly attracted by the frightened scream of a bird that went whirring away up the canyon. To the borderman this simple incident had a significance and he quickly stepped aside and entered a clump of bushes by the roadside.

From this position he soon made a discovery that for a moment startled him. An Indian, whom he knew by his dress to be one of the late allies of Red Vulture, came in sight walking up the pass, observing a caution that convinced the old hunter he had either detected the presence of danger in the air, or was making a very careful reconnaissance of the pass.

His presence satisfied Rattler that other Indians were near, and if so that their presence meant further mischief. The warrior had no doubt been sent out to reconnoiter the pass in the direction of Camp Kit Bandy—the only source from which they might expect trouble. If he was right in his suspicions, then the non-appearance of Rambling Dan and One-Armed Phil could be accounted for.

Waiting until the savage was out of sight up the pass, Rattler moved on toward the river, keeping away from the trail and well under cover, for if enemies were in force near he knew they could not be far from the ford.

He finally struck the river about fifty rods below the crossing, and, a moment later, made a discovery that confirmed his suspicions and worst fears.

Just above the ford, in the center of the river, was an island some five or six rods wide by eight or ten in length. It was covered with a dense growth of willows, not tall enough to conceal the presence of three horses upon it. They were bridled and saddled, and it did not require a second glance to tell Rattler that they were the identical animals Rambling Dan and One-Armed Phil had taken away with them! The young hunters, however, were not to be seen, but that they were concealed among the willows he had no doubt, for, on the opposite side of the stream, some eighty yards from the island, he discovered a score of red-skins and some two or three outlaws moving about, some of them with

rides in hand, and all with their eyes turned toward the island.

The next thing for the old hunter to do was to ascertain the situation on his side of the river opposite the island, and at once set about it. A careful reconnaissance disclosed the presence of quite a force of red-skins on that side, and what was more surprising, startling than all was the sight of Israel Danbaugh among the Indians, moving about, a free man, and acting very much like one in authority!

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FLOATER.

OLD TOM RATTLER took in the situation at once—the remnants of Turtle-Face and Captain Vulture's forces had reorganized, and, finding that most of the troops and all the friendly Indians had departed from Camp Kit Bandy, the villains had resolved to strike another blow at the whites. And with them Israel Danbaugh had joined issues, in hopes, no doubt, that he might be able to carry out his infamous scheme against John Rossgrove.

Tom was fully satisfied that Dan and Phil, and doubtless Margery Ashton also, were concealed upon the island. If so, he concluded they must have been there but a short time, and that the Indians were watching an opportunity for a shot, or were waiting for darkness before making an attack, knowing full well to attempt it in daylight would cost them dearly. But if darkness was what they were waiting for, they would not have long to wait, for already the sun was sinking behind the distant mountains.

What was Rattler to do? or rather, what could he do? To return to camp for assistance would require half the night, while the little assistance that he could give alone would avail nothing against such odds. He would willingly have risked his life with those he believed to be on the island could he have reached them.

For once in his eventful life, Tom Rattler was at a dead loss to know what to do—which way to turn. Finally, like one in bewilderment, he stole away down the river some fifty rods below the ford. There he stopped, scratched his head and put his wits to work.

By this time it was quite dark, and the shadows never seemed so heavy with gloom and full of creeping forms as they did at that hour. There was not a breath of air stirring. The river glided smoothly, noiselessly by, and only the chirruping of a cricket broke the foreboding silence.

Soon the eager ear of the borderman detected a slight sound in the stream, or, at least, he imagined he did. He stood on the low bank in the bushes at the river's very brink, and parting the foliage, put his head through the opening and glanced up and down the stream. Of course he saw nothing; but again he heard that splash in the water. It sounded nearer—at his very feet. He bent over and gazed down into the water. His eyes became fixed on something there—something that assumed the appearance of a human face, and a human face it was, with the dark hair floating about it in snaky clusters.

Framed around by the phosphorescent light of the water, Tom could see it was the face of a white man—a beardless face at that, and the old hunter was in the act of putting out his hands to touch it—to pull it closer that he might see whether it was the face of a dead friend or foe floating away with the current—when he suddenly started back, for he saw the head rise slightly in the water—saw that the supposed floating corpse was possessed of life!

Up rose the head until it sat squarely upon a pair of shoulders that also began to rise up out of the water and move toward the shore.

The question with Rattler now was as to whether the unknown was friend or foe, and he determined to settle it without further suspense. Drawing his revolver, he cocked it. The person in the water heard the click of the weapon and instantly became motionless, with his eyes turned searchingly upon the bushes that concealed the hunter. Now was Tom's time, and in a low tone he exclaimed:

"Whist, there, stranger!"

There was no response, but Rattler saw the unknown's form begin to settle in the water in evident alarm, and to prevent his escape the hunter concluded to bring things to a climax, be the unknown friend or foe, and in an audible tone he said:

"Hold on, stranger; I'm Tom Rattler—who are you?"

Again the form arose out of the water and then moved toward the shore, evidently, from the noise he made, somewhat excited.

"Sh! stranger," cautioned Tom, "or the varmints 'll hear ye! Give me yer hand and I'll give ye a lift."

The unknown put up his hand and Rattler helped him ashore with his left hand, still clutching his revolver in the right; and as he drew the stranger into the bushes the old man held tightly to his hand as a safeguard against a blow or knife-thrust.

"Are you really, Tom Rattler?" the unknown asked, when he found himself ashore.

"That's who I are at present, but confound my eyes, if I can make out who you be!" was Tom's response.

"I am Rambling Dan, the Boy Hunter!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TOM AND DAN MAKE A BOLD STRIKE.

"GREAT Rosycrusians!" burst in a loud whisper from Old Tom's lips, for he now recognized Rambling Dan's voice. "Dan! my boy, may God bless you! But, tell me, Dan! what's wrong—what has happened?"

"The accursed red-skins," answered Dan, "have had me, and Phil, and Miss Margery corralled on the island up there ever since noon to day."

"Just as I'd figgered things out when I see'd yer horses," declared Tom.

"We were ignorant of the presence of a single red-skin," Dan explained, "when we started across the river to-day, and were half across before they showed themselves on both sides. As we were near the island when they did, we steered for it and there we've been ever since crouching in the weeds. As soon as I thought it was dark enough not to be seen, I entered the river and floated down here. I'd hopes of gettin' aid here before they assaulted the island, as they'll likely do before morning. Are you here alone, Tom?"

"I war, but I'm not now," replied Old Tom, the presence of the daring youth reviving the old man's wonted spirit and action of mind; "the Red River Epidemic, and the Belle Fourche Cyclone are now together, and whatever is done for One-Armed Phil and the gal any ways soon we'll have to do it."

"But, Tom, there are thirty or forty of the foe," "I don't keer a darn, boy; we'll hit 'em a r'apsody, anyhow, to remind 'em that in the midst o' life they're in death, and the neighborhood of an Epidemic and Cyclone. Oh, Rosycrusians! if that big tumult, Stonewall Bob, war here, and that ole thundergustian, Kit Bandy, we'd hand 'em as hard a slap as they can."

"Well, I'll do my best, Tom," assured Dan. "I know you will boy; you're nerry as a roach-back, and I'm proud o' yer society. The more o' them varmints we kill to-night the less we'll have to kill hereafter, and seein' as it's dark as nothin' now, s'pose we glide up to'rds the ford and see what the hollyhocks are up to."

Silently they crept along in the shadows of the bushes that fringed the shore toward the ford. A deer-path running along the bank afforded them an easy advance and within a few minutes they were within hearing of the foe who was posted in an opening on the river-bank which sloped gradually down to the water.

The hunters had listened but a few minutes when they discovered that preparations were making for an attack, sure enough, upon the island. Just how soon it was to be made they could not learn. They could hear them talking about the "signal," and hear a loud-mouthed outlaw, or renegade, cursing somebody in an impatient manner.

Suddenly the report of a gun on the opposite side of the river crashed through the gloom. The long-expected signal for action seemed to have been given, for at once the foe began moving down the bank toward the water. They filed so close past Tom and Dan that they could have touched them with an extended rifle-barrel. The darkness, however, was so intense that the bordermen could see but the shadowy outlines of the forms as they moved by. They could not distinguish renegade from red-skin, and this quickly suggested a daring scheme to the now active brain of Old Rattler, which he at once communicated to Rambling Dan. It was a scheme characteristic of the reckless and venturesome old veteran of the border, and one into which the no less fearless and adventuresome boy entered with a will.

As the last of the shadowy forms filed past them, the hunters laid aside their hats, threw off their hunting jackets, and laid them aside with Tom's rifle and cartridge-belt. Then they stole noiselessly from their covert into the opening, and, turning, followed closely at the heels of the red-skins, the darkness concealing their identity, and the very boldness of the act itself being a blind to the foe.

Into the water waded the red-skins, and still at their heels followed the two shadowers, a revolver in the left hand and a knife in the right. Dan kept close behind Old Tom, being careful that he did not lose sight of his shadow, and soon they were mingling, elbow to elbow, almost, with the unsuspecting foe.

With as little noise as possible the party moved forward toward the island, the water reaching to their waists. But, in spite of their caution the vigilant One-Armed Phil detected their approach, and notified them of the fact by discharging a bullet that way, the missile passing just over their heads.

The savages made no response to the shot, but all quickly dropped upon their knees, thus submerging themselves to the chin. Rattler and Dan, of course, did likewise, and thus the party moved on, walking almost wholly submerged. Their movements, however, were not altogether noiseless, and another shot from the island came that way.

Rattler was on the watch for this second shot, and the weapon had scarcely flashed its tongue of fire ere he had flung his right arm out to one side, under the water, and drove his knife to the guard into the breast of the nearest red-skin.

With a shriek of horrible agony the savage leaped half out of the water and fell forward upon his face, making more noise with his arms and legs than a harpooned whale.

Aside from this one yell the red-skin never uttered another sound, and, naturally enough, his friends supposed he had received his death-wound from the island. Even Rambling Dan was ignorant of his friend's performances, and supposed the red-skin had been shot.

The noise made by the floundering savage enabled the watcher on the island to locate the position of the party with some degree of accuracy, and a third shot was fired, the bullet passing so close to Rattler's head that he not only heard it but felt the wind on his cheek! The veteran continued to improve the opportunities afforded him, and again plunged his blade into the vitals of a savage, and again escaped detection, the blow following so close after the shot that the foe attributed it to those on the island.

Still making no response, the savages moved on toward the island with remarkable coolness for an Indian. They were less than twenty yards from the little beast when two shots were fired almost simultaneously, but one of them was on the opposite side of the island; and, as the death-yell of a savage followed the shot on the other side, it not only told Tom and Dan that the enemy were approaching from the south, also, but that there was more than one defender upon the island! One-Armed Phil could not have under any circumstances, fired both shots, as only the fraction of a second intervened between them. Unless Margery had fired one of the rifles, then there was at least one other than she and Phil upon the island. But, who could it be? who could have reached the covert unobserved since Dan left?

There was no time now for speculation, for tongues of fire were flashing from the island before them in rapid succession, placing them in great danger of being killed by their own friends. So, taking the lead Rattler swung off to the right, giving a red-skin a parting dig as he did so that set the fellow howling with pain. As the blow had only inflicted a painful wound the Indian was not long in making known from whence it had come, and then,

for the first time, the presence of enemies in their very midst was discovered!

By this time Rattler and Dan had got themselves into position at one side, and crouching to their chins in the river began blazing away with their revolvers at the bobbing heads and forms of the now thoroughly enraged red-skins and renegades. Their weapons being charged with waterproof cartridges suffered no inconvenience from their submersion, and so effective were the shots of the lynx-eyed borderers, as well as those from the island, that the enemy were almost thrown into a panic.

No longer could the red-skins maintain their silence, and so opened up their throats with frightful yells of rage, that were mingled with the screams and cries of the wounded. Then to these sounds were added the battle-cry of the Red River Epidemic and Rambling Dan as they blazed away at the foe.

The savages now found themselves exposed to a deadly cross-fire, and with apparently half their force already killed or wounded, they turned and fled shoreward before they had dealt a single blow!

This was a surprising, as well as pleasant, turn in the situation to Tom and Dan, and they hastened toward the island, Old Rattler heralding his coming in a voice not to be mistaken by those who had ever heard the Epidemic's yell. As they advanced they discharged the empty shells from their revolvers and reloaded with cartridges they had been thoughtful enough to place in oil-skin pouches, in their pockets before venturing to follow the Indians.

Meanwhile the sound of a sharp conflict arose from the other side of the island, and it was to take a hand in this that Tom and Dan moved in such headlong haste, for now, above the noise of the struggle, Old Tom could recognize the stentorian voice of that young border giant, Stonewall Bob!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SAD NEWS FROM CAMP.

How Stonewall Bob came to be on the island Old Tom and Dan did not stop to inquire, but hastened with all speed to the scene of battle.

At the southern extremity of the island they found not only Stonewall and Phil, but a third man battling with the savages that had come over from the south side of the river. The young giant with a clubbed gun was raging along the bank like a mad man dealing frightful blows upon the heads of the foe, ably and industriously assisted, by Phil and the unknown.

The bank at this point was about four feet high and sloped slightly down to the water. Up this bank the foe were endeavoring to climb, and to prevent this the defenders were kept busy. Time and again the savages were beat back, but rallying, renewed the attack, yelling like fiends. Armed only with knives and tomahaws they were unable to reach the human cyclones on the bank above them, but kept up the struggle, momentarily expecting assistance from their friends on the other side, for the confusion of their own struggle had kept them in ignorance of the inglorious defeat of that party. Fully one-half of their force was floundering in the river with cracked and broken heads when Old Rattler and Rambling Dan appeared on the scene and began pouring lead and fire into their faces.

This proved more than Indian courage could stand, and at once they began to melt away from the bank and break for more congenial quarters, leaving their wounded to take care of themselves as best they could.

The struggle thus brought to a successful termination Stonewall Bob panting with exertion turned and asked:

"Who did that finishin' act?—fired those shots?"

"Them shots came from tools held in the paws o' Thomas Rattler and Ramblin' Dan'l," responded Tom, himself.

"Great King!" exclaimed Bob, "it is Tom Rattler, sure!"

"It are, by the Rosycrusians!" added the hunter, "and it do seem to me that we made lovely and divine connections in this fracas; but, it's a mystery to me and Dan'l how you come to be here."

"We discovered, before dark, the situation of our friends and swam to the island, reaching here but ten minutes after Rambling Dan had departed," Bob explained.

"We?" repeated Tom, "who's we?"

"Ichabod Flea, and I."

"Here!" exclaimed Ichabod, advancing and grasping Tom's hand. "Glad to meet you, Thomas."

"Rosycrusians! this is a bull s'prise party all 'round!" Tom declared.

"Especially and particularly to the Ingins," added Flea; "but, Thomas, how came you here?"

"Come over, we did, with the Ingins—waded right in and mingled with them in the river like brothers. In the darkness one looked like the others, only more so."

"You're a Joe-dandy, you are, Tom!" declared Ichabod.

"Thanks, Ichabod, for the compliment; but, if only that delectable, Iyin' Old Kit Bandy war here now how we could relish this victory!"

"Ah! Thomas, the real battle has not begun yet," assured Bob.

"What do you mean, Robert?"

"Ruth Graves and Gypsy are in the hands of outlaws and red-skins!"

"Don't jest, Stonewall, that way."

"He speaks the truth, Tom. I'm sorry to say," affirmed Ichabod Flea; "they were carried off to-day soon after your departure from camp. They were out ridin' with a couple young soldiers, and on their return they were waylaid, the soldiers shot and the girls carried away into the hills. One of the soldiers was killed outright, and the other seriously if not mortally wounded. Both were left for dead. The wounded man says four men with masked faces dashed from the mouth of a dark defile less than half a mile from camp and captured the girls after the shots had been fired. It was to find you that Bob and I came down here, and it's well we did, or Margery would have been added to the list of captives."

"Wal, this is horrible!" declared Old Tom, "and it looks as though we bordermen have made some bad breaks the last few days in not keeping a closer watch 'round us. But, pards, do you know who's at the bottom o' this new order o' deviltry?"

"Turtle Face and Red Vulture's followers, or the remnants of their gangs, I suppose," answered Stonewall.

"Yes, egged on by that delicious villain, Israel Danbaugh!" averred Rattler.

"Do you think so, Tom?"

"I know so!" returned Tom with emphasis, "for didn't I see the villain himself this afternoon 'mongst the red varmints struttin' 'bout like he war cook o' the walk? Oh! by the Rosycrusians! that's been too much picnickin' gait on up at Camp Bandy, Robert Stonewall. Danbaugh and his red-riddled allies are 'bout in the proper humor now to murder them gals, knowin' it would be a larder blow to us than death its self. But, boys, we'll foller 'em to the end o' the trail, and don't neglect to remember it. We'll have them gals back dead or alive! Oh! if Kit Bandy was able to help us! Our force would be one ole pirate more—twenty government soldiers and a battery o' artillery stronger in a fight, and if any deception and fraud war required to complete our work, Kit and his measly little pard, Ichabod Flea, could furnish it smokin' hot. But, boys, whar's the gal, Margery?"

"Here, Tom," answered One-Armed Phil, who came forward, leading Margery. "Miss Ashton, this is Mr. Tom Rattler."

"Old Tom Rattler," spoke up the hunter, taking Margery's extended hand; "I am glad to meet you, Margery, and hope ye ar'n't scared to death."

"Oh, no, Tom," the girl replied, "but I must confess I was terribly frightened. To your brave men I owe my life."

"That's what we come here for, and it's a lovely pleasure to know that our efforts weren't in vain."

Arrangements for leaving the island were at once made. Rattler, Flea and Rambling Dan entered the river and waded and swam down the stream, finally landing near where Dan had first gone ashore.

Then they crept back up the stream and made a careful reconnoissance of the woods and breaks contiguous to the ford. This occupied fully three hours, and finding no enemy about they signaled to those on the island and they immediately came over and then the entire party set out for Camp Kit Bandy.

It was nearly daylight when the camp was reached. The party found everybody awake. In fact, not an eye had been closed there that night. A deep gloom and fear hung over every heart, and when Old Tom related his story of Israel Danbaugh's presence among the outlaws and red-skins, the wrath of Kit Bandy and Austin Smith, the detectives, knew no bounds.

Old Kit declared, by the horn o' Joshua, that he was going to take the enemy's trail at daylight if he had to crawl, and but for the fact that the Surgeon Scout administered to him a heavy opiate that kept his eyes closed and his tongue still until the next day, he would doubtless have undertaken the trip.

When he did come around, however, and learned that Stonewall Bob, Rambling Dan, One-Armed Phil and Austin Smith, with Old Tom Rattler as guide, had departed hours before to the rescue of the maidens, he quieted down with the observation:

"By the horn o' Joshua! it's pervokin' for a young man like me to be tied down this way, while that ole fossil, Tom Rattler, 'll have the glory o' rescuin' them gals. It war always so when he and I worked together in a case whar thar was a gal; I'd do the fightin', bleedin', and dyin', while ole Tom would come up with a smile bloomin' all over his ancient face, and the girl droopin' sweetly on his arm. But for all that, Tom's a Roman legion, God bless him!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

YOUR COUSIN, ISRAEL DANBAUGH.

EARLY in the morning found Tom Rattler and his party on their way westward through the hills upon the trail of Ruth and Gypsy's captors, the latter's horse-tracks being easily followed.

Some ten miles back they came to where the outlaws had halted—evidently for some time. Here they had been joined by a much larger party of horsemen who had come in from the southeast, and the pursuers concluded that the latter were Danbaugh and his gang that had joined the others there after their defeat at the Belle Fourche ford. In evidence of this, in fact, two newly made graves were discovered near, and upon opening them they were found to contain the bodies of two Indians who had doubtless received their death wounds at the island.

In looking around Stonewall Bob found a small package tied up in a paper and suspended from the limb of a tree where it could be easily seen. Taking it into his possession he found it addressed in pencil to "John Ross Grove, Esq., Camp Kit Bandy."

Opening the package Bob found it was composed of a number of small slips of paper numbered from one to ten consecutively. Upon them the following communication was addressed to Ross Grove.

"JOHN ROSS GROVE, ESQ.—DEAR COUSIN: this finds me on my way to the far West, and I have the pleasure of the Misses Ruth and Gypsy's company. You folks played your cards well, but you will find I hold the winning hand in the end. I now defy you, Jack Bramble, Tom Rattler, Kit Bandy, the whole army and the devil, as well as that smiling, Soft-Snap Austin Smith, and Stonehead Bob. I mean to hold my advantage, John Ross Grove, and bleed your purse if not your heart. Now, if you have any desire to release your daughter, you can do so only in one way—by compromise. If you so desire, as soon as convenient put an "ad" in the "Heelena, Montana, Times" addressed to "Daggar" and asking for an interview, at the same time indicating where you may be found. Remember, there's to be no snap judgment. My agent will call on you—not I, John. Meanwhile, don't let your blood-hounds crowd me. Call them off, or I swear you will never see the girls alive! All, if anything, must be effected by compromise. Don't forget this, for until I hear from you through the medium indicated, you need not expect to hear again from

"Your cousin,

"ISRAEL DANBAUGH."

Old Rattler could not suppress a mild oath when he heard this heartless, brutal message read.

"He's a fiend and a coward!" he added; "a low, slimy, wolfish thing that thinks he can prevent his

bein' hunted down by threats! Eh? what do you say, Stonehead Robert, and "Soft-Snap" Smith?"

A smile passed over the faces of all as Bob replied:

"We'll follow them to the Pacific Ocean but what we'll have those girls, dead or alive!"

"Amen!" exclaimed Old Tom, "so let the pursuit be resumed forthwith and at once immediately right now."

And so saying, the old borderman led off on the trail.

The enemy had the advantage in that they, or most of them were mounted, and could travel after dark, while the pursuers, in order to keep the trail, could travel only in daylight. This fact, however, did not discourage Old Tom. He was satisfied that days, and perhaps weeks, might be required to overtake the foe; but it mattered not to him if it should require a year. He was determined to follow the trail to its end.

For two days they followed due westward. The trail was "warm," as Tom expressed it, but not once were the foe sighted.

Finally the trail began to bear toward the southwest, and this led the pursuers to mistrust that the enemy were heading for the fastnesses of the Black Hills, if not for the great mountains beyond. Still, nothing daunted, the party pushed on, and finally, on the sixth day of the pursuit, entered a mountainous country, where the dark and winding canyons and defiles made rapid traveling impossible, and where it was necessary to keep a man deployed in advance as a safeguard against hidden danger.

Rambling Dan was acting in this capacity toward the close of this first day in the great hills. He was some little distance in advance of his friends, carefully pursuing his way up a deep, gloomy defile, when suddenly his ear caught a sound in the bushes on the right. Stopping short, he dropped his rifle into position for instant use, and the next moment a blood-stained apparition staggered from the thicket, and with hands uplifted in mute appeal, stopped still before him!

CHAPTER XXXV.

TROUBLE IN CAMP.

LET us now for a while accompany the outlaws and their red allies on their retreat into the hills.

Israel Danbaugh was, in reality, the leading spirit in the party, and, barring his lack of knowledge of frontier and camp life, he soon convinced the gang that he possessed all the elements of character necessary to make him a fit successor to the notorious Captain Vulture.

Ruth Graves was sad-hearted and downcast from the very first, but the impulsive little Gypsy's spirit could not be broken, and therefore gave her captors a deal of trouble. Several times while in camp and on the march her hands were tied to keep her from doing mischief, but even this and threats of other punishment could not subdue her defiant, willful spirit, nor stop the lashings of her caustic tongue.

Both captives were treated fairly well. To the credit of Danbaugh, be it said, he cautioned his white friends and red about using rude or insulting language in the presence or hearing of the girls.

Up to the day that the foe entered the Black Hills proper, their journey had been more like the march of a funeral party than a band of marauders. The fear of pursuit, as well as the exasperating fact of their having been unable to avenge the death of two-thirds of their friends, kept them silent and vigilant. But when they reached the hills their courage revived, for they felt safe now from all danger.

On the other hand the spirit of Gypsy became subdued. It seemed that upon entering the hills all hope of rescue faded from her breast and despondency succeeded.

A young half-breed Indian of twenty years, with the euphonious name of White-Smoke Jim, had been detailed by Turtle-Face himself as Gypsy's attendant and escort. He spoke English well, and was rather a good-looking Indian, and prided himself on his personal appearance and his accomplishments as a runner, leaper, and fighter. From the very first the young warrior had endeavored to win the good graces of "Panther-Killer," as an Indian whom Gypsy had relieved of some of his facial cuticle had named her, and his efforts at reconciliation and peacemaking afforded his friends no little amusement.

Israel Danbaugh, however, looked upon White-Smoke's attention to the girl with some misgivings, for he saw the fellow was infatuated with the pretty little madcap, and there was no telling what his infatuation might lead to in the end.

The first night in the great Hills the band encamped in a little park approached through a narrow defile and surrounded by steep, rocky, brushy bluffs.

As usual Ruth and Gypsy were given the freedom of the camp. They came and went at pleasure though were never permitted to go beyond the guards.

The night passed quietly, but early next morning the camp was thrown into a fever of excitement by the announcement that Gypsy had disappeared from camp, and the further discovery that every saddle-girth and every bridle had been literally cut to pieces!

At first it was believed that the girl had done the cutting, but how she could have escaped from camp untraced, guarded as it had been, was a mystery to all. Even Ruth pleaded entire ignorance of a knowledge of how and when her madcap companion had escaped.

A cold and more extended search was made for the girl, but no trace of her could be found.

Suspicion of treachery was aroused, and Danbaugh charged White-Smoke Jim of being accessory in the girl's disappearance and the cutting of the girths and bridles.

The half-breed indignantly denied the charge; but when it was discovered that his hunting knife was not in its accustomed sheath and that he was unable to account for its whereabouts, the fellow's guilt seemed almost conclusive.

Others than Danbaugh knew that "Jim" had been infatuated with the pretty captive, and it did not take a counsel long to decide that he was guilty of treachery in aiding the maiden to escape, in cutting the harness, and premeditated desertion of the party.

The sentence pronounced was death by shooting!

Strongly the young man denied his guilt, but his words were received with yells and jeers, and cries of "produce the knife! produce the knife!" But this he could not do, and his past fidelity to the band, his bravery in battle, and his skill as a rifle-shot and other savage accomplishments, went for naught. *He must die!*

The youth was taken and tied standing to a tree hard by. Three outlaws with rifles were detailed by Danbaugh to do the shooting. They were stationed about ten steps from the condemned. A loud-mouthed renegade called, and very appropriately, too, Dirty-Dog Bill was to give the signal to fire.

In consideration of his kindness to her and Gypsy, Ruth made an earnest appeal for White-Smoke's life, but her appeal was answered in words of mockery.

Taking his position, Dirty-Dog Bill exclaimed: "Attention thar, low; when I count 'three,' you fellers want to slam the lead right into the traitor's bosom; make ready!"

The three men raised their rifles, and as they did so a wild, terrified shriek burst from the steep hillside above, causing every savage and outlaw to start with sudden fear.

Lifting their eyes, they were struck speechless with surprise on beholding the lithe figure of Little Gypsy come flying down the acclivity toward them, a long knife clutched in her hand!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ISRAEL BREAKS FOR THE BAD LANDS.

THE execution of White-Smoke Jim was for the moment forgotten, for now all eyes were focused on the little madcap Gypsy, flying down the acclivity, where it seemed her neck would be broken before ever she reached the level. But sure-footed as a deer, she gained the valley unharmed, and running to where White-Smoke stood, faced the excited crowd, and in a tragic voice exclaimed:

"You shall not kill Jim! He is innocent of what I heard you charge him! I cut the girths and bridles myself!"

"And Jim furnished you the knife!" put in Dirty-Dog.

"And then helped to conceal you," added Danbaugh.

"It's a lie—a lie!—both of them!" the girl frantically exclaimed. "I did it all myself! You shall not kill him, you hideous cowards!"

"Stand aside, vixen," commanded Danbaugh; "we will not be trifled with longer!"

Seeing there was no appealing to the villains' mercy, Gypsy turned and deliberately cut the thongs that held White-Smoke to the tree. As she did so, she said:

"Run, Jim, for your life—they mean to kill you! Run, for my sake, Jim!"

But for this last appeal White-Smoke would have died in his tracks rather than turn his back to his would-be murderers, conscious of his innocence; his admiration for Gypsy, however, would admit of no refusal of her appeal. He glanced quickly around him, then like a deer bounded into the bushes fringing the base of the bluff.

A yell of savage indignation resounded through the canyon, and half a score of warriors dashed away in pursuit of the boy.

Up from among the bushes upon the side of the bluff White-Smoke soon appeared—up with the swift, sure footsteps of a mountain goat.

The revolvers of the outlaws began to bark, and bullets whistled through the air. And once the fugitive paused slightly and seemed to stagger as if he had been hit; then with a new burst of speed he dashed on up, and up until the summit of the heights was reached and then disappeared from sight.

Gypsy, who had watched his ascent in breathless suspense, now clapped her hands and laughed in mad delight in the very face of the enraged Danbaugh.

But White-Smoke was not yet entirely out of danger, for a number of fleet-footed savages climbed the bluff and started away in pursuit of him.

Danbaugh grasped Gypsy rudely by the arm and walked her into the tent where Ruth sat, saying as he did so:

"Miss, you want to settle yourself now, or I shall have you bound hand and foot, gagged and blindfolded!"

"No, you won't, you old fool!" was Gypsy's rejoinder; then as Danbaugh, white with rage, turned away, she sat down by Ruth, saying in a changed tone, a smile on her face: "I don't think they'll get Jim now, do you, Ruth? He's innocent as you are of cutting them bridles and saddles. I slipped his knife out of his belt last night, and when you were sound asleep, I stole out and cut up the things. I wanted to make them trouble, and delay them so our friends, if we have any alive, could overtake us. I hid in the cutest little hole, half-way up on the bluff, and pulled the hole in after me. An Injun passed me twice so close I'd a notion to stick him with my knife, just for fun. But I'm awful sorry my mischief has caused poor Jim trouble."

"You must be careful now, Gypsy," cautioned Ruth, "for our captors are all enraged, and they might do you harm."

"I'll let them be now," the girl replied; "but what fun they'll have mending their bridles, for I just tore 'em carved them!"

The "fun" lasted nearly two hours, and I bet they got through the girths were compelled to appropriate belts, strips of buckskin jackets, and even lariats, to make serviceable their outfit; and when this was completed, another hour or two was lost, waiting the return of those who had gone in pursuit of White-Smoke Jim. This latter loss of time would have been considered well spent had it resulted in any good, but it did not; the warriors returned empty-handed and crestfallen. The night passed "James" had out-sprinted them and escaped.

Danbaugh and his right-hand man, Bellnose Mack, were greatly exercised over the half-breed's escape; they knew they had incurred the enmity of the youth, and that he would pursue them to the bitter end. They were not afraid of him alone, but of the mischief he could do them indirectly, for, knowing their destination with the girls, and being familiar with all the intricacies of the hills, he could lead a party of avengers up on them at will.

A change in their destination was therefore pro-

posed by Bellnose Mack. He suggested that they strike north, double back fifty miles east, and then make for the Bad Lands of Montana.

To this Turtle-Face and his warriors objected; however, he consented for Danbaugh and his outlaw companions to take the captives and go where they pleased. He was no longer disposed to follow the outlaws, or join issues with them. His experience of the past month had fully satisfied him with partnership expeditions, and they were going on to their destination, White-Smoke Jim to the contrary, notwithstanding.

The decision of the chief was exactly to the outlaws' wish, and although expressing deep regrets at having to part from the chief and his brave followers, they packed up at once, bid the red-skins and renegades farewell, and with the captives departed.

There were just five of the outlaws, counting Danbaugh—a sorry remnant of the once notorious band of Red Vultures.

They rode on westward some three miles then turned northward into a side canyon from which they expected to turn eastward and on to the Bad Lands where Bellnose Mack assured Danbaugh Old Satan himself would be unable to find them.

Glad they were rid of the outlaws and the possible necessity of having to fight to retain possession of the captives, the Indians and white renegades resumed their retreat at a leisurely pace, keeping a warrior in the rear to guard against danger from that source. And it was well they did, for toward evening of that very day the scout brought in the startling information that a party of white men was in hot pursuit of them, accompanied by White-Smoke Jim!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TOM RATTLER IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

AT sight of the blood-stained Indian Rambling Dan grew a bit uneasy through fear some trap was about to be sprung upon him and his friends, and as the Indian started toward him, his hands still uplifted, he demanded:

"Who are you?"

"White-Smoke Jim," promptly came the answer.

"Well, what do you want?" questioned Dan.

"To talk with you—to all of you," he responded.

The rest of the party coming up, Dan said to them:

"Boys, this is Smoky Jim, and he wants to talk with us, he informs me."

"By Rosycrusians! Jim," exclaimed Old Rattler, "it looks as tho' you'd been in a den o' roach-backs."

"No," said the Indian with a shake of the head, "I was wounded and pursued by my friends."

"They war luscious friends, I'd say," Rattler observed. "Who war yer friends? whar'd'ye belong?"

"I was one of Turtle-Face's followers."

"The holy Rosycrusians! war you too ornery to belong to that gang o' viperish hellsions?"

"I was threatened with death because I was a friend to the captive maidens you seek to rescue."

An exclamation burst from the lips of the party as they gathered closer about the Indian.

"Indian," said Old Tom, eying the half-breed sharply, "are you tellin' us the truth? War you driven outen camp because, as yo say, you war friendly to the captive girls?"

"I have told the truth," declared Jim; "I was sentenced to be shot. The white girl, Gypsy, cut my bonds and by her request I ran. They shot at me. I was wounded in the arm. They pursued me. The bushes and thorns tore and scratched my face and it bled—my wounds all bled until I feel weak."

"When was it, Jim, this all happened?"

"This morning."

"And you say the gals war alive and well?"

"Yes."

"Good! good!" exclaimed the entire party.

"This puts only ten hours behind, boys," said Ichabod Flea. "We'll overhaul them yet. But say, Jim, is there a white man called Danbaugh in the crowd?"

"Yes," Jim answered, "and he's a bad man—he the one that want me shot because I was a friend to girls."

"Did you try to help them escape?"

"No; but I meant to."

"When?"

"When I got a chance."

"How do the girls bear up under their captivity?"

"One is sad and quiet—Gypsy makes them lots of trouble. She cut their bridles all to pieces. They say White-Smoke done it."

"Do you know, Jim, where the gang is headed for?" Stonewall Bob asked.

"Yes—far away—many days' travel yet. You can catch 'em if you hurry on—never will if you talk, talk talk," was the sage answer of the youth.

"And what are you goin' to do now?" Rattler asked.

"Go with you and show you the way."

"And won't betray us—lead us into a trap?"

"If you fear me, don't trust me!" was the pertinent reply of the young half-breed.

White-Smoke Jim's wounded arm, his straightforward story, his cool, calm demeanor, and the unflinching gaze of his black eyes, were all sufficient to the critical Old Tom Rattler of his truthfulness and honesty, and he at once set the youth at ease by expressing implicit confidence in him, and in accepting his proffered service.

That the Indian's desire to serve them was as much for the purpose of avenging his own wrongs on Danbaugh as any other, there was not a doubt in any one's mind; but this made him none the less desirable addition to their party.

After Ichabod Flea had dressed the Indian's wounded arm the pursuit was continued until dark, when a halt was made for the night.

Rambling Dan having succeeded in shooting a deer close to camp, the party had a royal supper of fresh venison with plenty left for breakfast and also some to carry with them.

They were off bright and early next morning and about ten o'clock struck the camp-grounds where Jim had so suddenly taken leave of his friends.

Continuing on in great haste they passed the mouth of the canyon into which Danbaugh and

party had turning without detecting the deviating trail.

Two more days were thus passed and a third was drawing to a close when the pressing need of something to eat sent Old Tom and Stonewall Bob back into the hills in search of game, the others to continue on to a certain point clearly designated by "Jim."

The hunters struck a plateau, or rather a bench of the mountain, where they felt confident a deer could be found. At the head of a little depression or swale trending off toward the south the hunters separated, one going on the left side and the other the right of the swale. They did not get out of sight of each other at any time, and in this way they had gone perhaps half a mile when Old Tom caught sight of a form gliding among the rocks some two hundred paces before him.

It did not take a second look to tell him that the form was that of a skulking Indian, and without manifesting any alarm or even changing his gait, he turned and started leisurely toward Stonewall Bob. He had gone something like thirty rods when he suddenly came to a halt and started back. He found himself standing on the brink of a deep chasm some twelve or fifteen feet wide, and so deep its bottom was lost in darkness. The swale at the head of which they had separated had grown into the ugly chasm unknown to either.

Tom beckoned Bob toward him. In a few moments the two stood facing each other, the abyss between. "Bob, there's an Injun skulkin' down ahead o' me," Rattler said.

"The dickens you say!" exclaimed Bob; "then you had better be gettin' round on this side, for—"

A savage yell cut short his speech. It came from up the chasm, and was answered from below and half-a-dozen other points on Tom's side. A glance told Bob the savages were closing in on the old man from every quarter, and that escape up or down the chasm would be impossible.

"Jump the chasm, Tom! Jump it, can't you?" he exclaimed.

Having already measured the abyss with his eye, Old Tom shook his head, saying:

"I never could make it. Bob—not spring enough—"

"Then throw me your rifle—quick!" interrupted the now thoroughly excited young giant.

Tom pitched his rifle to Bob who, dropping it on the ground by his own, walked backward a few paces, then he dashed forward to the edge of the chasm and like a diver bounded through the air, landing on the other edge of Rattler's side!

"Heavens! what a leap!" exclaimed Tom; "if I'd—"

He did not finish the sentence for Bob seized the old borderman by the collar of his hunting-shirt and the seat of his buckskins, jerked him off his feet and holding him face downward, swung him to and fro a time or so and then, with a mighty effort, pitched him head-foremost through the air over the yawning chasm, landing him sprawling on his stomach on the opposite side. Then again backing away the young giant made a running jump and again leaped the chasm with apparent ease.

Improbable as it may seem this almost superhuman feat of the big borderman was performed in less than five-and-twenty seconds; but it was none too quick to avert danger, for the yelling red-skins were pressing close.

Falling heavily on his stomach as he did, Old Tom had the breath completely knocked out of him, and as the old fellow scrambled to his knees he seemed half dazed.

Seeing his condition, Bob snatched up the two rifles in his left hand and with his right he again seized Tom by the collar and ran dragging him along like a lion would a lamb to the cover of a huge rock some twenty paces back from the abyss. Nor did he gain that cover a second too soon, for as he dropped behind it, half a dozen bullets whistled over his head.

Not knowing but that the red-skins would leap the chasm as he had done, the giant prepared to receive them; but when the red-skins came up to the brink of the yawning depths they paused and drew back. They had not the courage to attempt the daring feat so easily performed by the athletic Stonewall.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"KORRILED, BY THE GREAT ROSYCRUSIANS!"

"GREAT ROSYCRUSIANS!" exclaimed Old Tom Rattler, as he recovered his breathing. "what the blazes has happened? Did a cyclone hit me? or did I hit a cyclone? Am I in the chasm? or in heaven? How is it, Stonewall Bob?"

Smiling at the old man's confusion, Bob briefly explained what had happened.

"Holy horrors!" the old man exclaimed; "I wish Old Kit Bandy could 'a' seed you perform! Boy, you're a lilly-lipped hummer—a sort o' a whirlwind on legs. The ljes a pitchin' me across that ditch that I couldn't jump is the biggest joke o' the trip. But say, Bob, it begins to look as though we'd come to the end o' that trail and find thar's somethin' on it, eh?"

"You've been wantin' a fight, Tom," answered Bob, "and I guess you'll get it; but then we want to get away from here before the varlets head the channel and swoop down upon us."

This thought came none too soon, for glancing up the plateau they saw several Indians leaping the chasm at a narrow point to their side.

Taking a peep around the rock Stonewall saw two red-skins with rifles in hand standing on the other side of the abyss watching that they did not escape. Communicating the fact to Tom the two prepared for action, and stepping back a ways from the rock, both sprung suddenly to their feet and made snap-shots at the red-skins, Tom with his rifle and Bob his two revolvers. As both were experts at this kind of work both red-skins fell; but judging from the frantic howling they set up they had only been wounded.

That, however, was sufficient for the hunters' present straight, and turning they at once dashed away southward. The Indians coming down the plateau saw them fleeing and set up a frightful yelling and at the same time redoubled their efforts to overhaul the two irrepressible white hunters.

By this time it was almost dusk, a fact that was in favor of the fugitives, for it enabled them to dodge the red-skins; but in so doing, they became

separated themselves in passing through a strip of timber that was thick with undergrowth. Hoping, however, to meet again on the other side of the strip, they hurried on.

Tom Rattler, on emerging from the timber, could see nor hear anything of Bob, but as he could hear the red-skins in pursuit, or, at least, making considerable noise not far away, he moved on, knowing he would meet Bob at camp anyhow.

As good luck would have it, the old man descended a long, steep hill and came upon his other friends at the place designated by White-Smoke Jim. But Bob was not there yet, and as they were in an open, exposed position, safer quarters would have to be found. They waited there, however, for Bob until they heard the red-skins coming near, and then they struck out up the defile.

They had proceeded some forty or fifty rods, and were just opposite the black mouth of a deep defile on their right, when suddenly a dozen or more Indians appeared in the pass before them to dispute their further passage in that direction.

"Into the gorge, boys!" exclaimed Old Tom, "for the red-rinded varlets are afore and aft o' us!" and suiting the action to the word, he led the way into the narrow rift which fortune seemed to have placed so handy.

With quick footsteps all whirled into the passage after him, and the foe with a yell came dashing up as if they meant to follow, but a shot from Rattler's rifle warned them to keep back.

Proceeding along the defile, the hunters found it grew deeper as they advanced, and the walls more upright and barren of vegetation; and as they moved on the passage began to narrow, and all at once the walls came so close together that the men could only proceed in single file. This narrow way, however, suddenly admitted them into a broad, circular opening, where, to the surprise and horror of all, the canyon suddenly terminated with high, projecting walls on all sides, with no possible way of egress except by the way they had entered.

Scarcely had they made the discovery when a wild yelling and laughing were heard coming from the triumphant foe down the canyon.

"Kor-rill-d, by the great Rosycrusians!" burst from Tom Rattler's lips.

"Exactly!" affirmed One-Armed Phil, "we've been headed off in a skillful way, and driven right into a death-trap!"

"Cuss the luck!" Rattler exclaimed. "We've come a long ways to git caught in this hole like a band o' innocent lambs. White-Smoke, how is this? Didn't you know this kor-rill was here?"

"If I had I would have told you," replied Jim, betraying some uneasiness.

"Wal, boys," said Rattler, with an air of resignation, "they have got us in here, but death's a long ways off yet, if we are out o' fodder. Stonewall Bob's at large, I hope, and if they don't down him, we've a chance for life, but if they do—well, I'd as soon die here as any place!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NASTY-DOG "BARKS."

FROM the manner in which the savages and renegades kept up their triumphant yelling and laughing it was plain enough to the hunters that they were in a state of frenzied delight. They seemed in no hurry to complete their work by crowding upon the besieged, but were disposed to celebrate their victory by degrees—as it was won, step by step.

Another thing that doubtless deterred them from making a rush was a knowledge of the fact that one man at the mouth of the narrow entrance could defend the place against fifty—the same advantage in keeping them out that they had in keeping the hunters in.

Ichabod Flea was placed to guard the entrance, a revolver in each hand, while the other kept watch for foes on the edge above.

With the coming of darkness Ichabod saw that the savages had lighted a fire at the lower end of the narrow passage. This was, no doubt, to prevent the hunters escaping from their trap unseen, but at the same time the same light would enable the guard to see a red-skin should one attempt to enter the passage.

An hour or two after night set in the besieged's ears were greeted all of a sudden by a voice calling out from the top of the chasm:

"Hullo, down thar! how's you fellers makin' it in the 'Fool's Trap'?"

"That's pretty well said," observed Old Tom, in an undertone to his friends; then with his rifle in hand he stepped out from under the wall and watched sharply for the outlines of the renegade's head against the sky in hopes of giving him an answer with hot lead. But the fellow was too cautious to expose himself, and after five minutes' silence he again called out:

"I say, Stonewall Bobby, giant and wall-eyed-terror, why don't you kick the bottom outen the Fool-Trap?—pull down a wal and go forth to liberty?"

"It's the voice of the renegade, Nasty-Dog Bill," said White-Smoke Jim.

"And you see," added Rattler, "that Nasty-Dog Bill thinks Stonewall is in here? That tells us Bob's safe and will be heard from in time. Bobby's a thorn in them varlets' flesh, Bobby is; but it'll be well to let 'em continue to think he's in here, and I'll reply for him, so here goes: Say, Nasty-Pup, what are ye shootin' from kiver for, up thar? If you've anything to say to Stonewall Bob, the big Injun-killer, come down—plenty room here."

"No, thank ye," came down the reply, "I'm a leetle partic'lar 'bout my company; but I may call in the mornin' as you'll prob'ly remain in there till lark-soar, anyhow."

"That depends on how we feel," Rattler retorted. "Hal hal hal!" laughed the renegade, "you're a jolly joker—a comic amantick, you are. Say, are you Bill Nye? or Scratch Twain? You 'pear to be awful funny."

During all this exchange of compliments Tom kept a close watch for the renegade's head. His fingers fairly tingled for a shot at the facetious villain.

The conversation finally ceased by Dirty-Dog bidding the besieged good-night and returning to his friends.

Tom and One-Armed Phil now made an exploration of the "Trap." They found the walls projecting more or less all around. The ground was strewn with rocks and spalls that time had loosened from the face of the cliffs, and with these the party proceeded to erect a barricade to protect them, when daylight should come, from shots fired from the top of the "Trap."

It was a tedious job in the darkness but, nevertheless, it was completed after two or three hours' labor; and then there was nothing to do but to sit down and wait.

The guard at the entrance was relieved every two hours.

The Indians kept up their fire throughout the entire night, though all became quiet in their camp after midnight.

With the coming of day the guard retired behind the stone barricade under the projecting wall, Old Rattler with his Winchester taking a position behind the same cover to watch the approach to the "Trap," the barricade having been erected so as to command such a view.

"Now let 'em come," the hunter observed, "for as they'll have to come in single file, I'll string six at a time on one bullet from 'Ole Paralyze'."

But the besieged found out that the foe did not propose to risk another life unnecessarily. They were so situated that they could take their time for their work of vengeance.

During the day the hunters caught glimpses of red-skins around the top of the "Trap" evidently watching for a chance shot; but the besieged refrained from firing upon them although several tempting chances were offered.

Thus the day wore away, and night again set in, but, without food or water, the heroic little band kept up their spirits, their hopes of escape centering wholly upon Stonewall Bob.

Just how the young borderer could render them assistance against thirty or forty savages, no one could imagine. That was a matter for Bob to determine, and that he would succeed in some way, or, at least, make the attempt, they had no doubt, providing he should find out the predicament they were in.

Again the red-skins lighted their fire at the lower end of the narrow passage. Then they spent an hour or two in a wild, hilarious carousal, after which Nasty-Dog Bill again appeared on the rim of the "Trap" and made some sneering inquiries about the state of the besieged's health and the condition of their larder. This he kept up for some time, but finding he could elicit no reply from the hunters, he retired and quiet succeeded.

One-Armed Phil and Rambling Dan took the first watch. Tom and White-Smoke Jim laid down behind the barricade to sleep until their turn should come to relieve Phil and Dan.

Ichabod Flea and Austin Smith sat down under the wall a rod or so from the barricade and entered into conversation. While thus engaged both heard a pebble drop near them. Of this, however, they thought nothing until they heard it repeated several times. Then Ichabod concluded it meant something, and rising he walked out from under the rock. As he did so he ran against something swinging in the air before him. Involuntarily he shrunk back, and dropping on his knees bent forward so as to bring the object out against the starry sky.

An object he saw, true enough, and of considerable size. It seemed to be suspended in the air, for it was swaying gently back and forth.

Cautiously the little detective approached it—put out his hand and touched it. It was nothing possessed of life, and so he took hold of it and ran his fingers over and around it. The smell of roasted meat assailed his nostrils and sharpened his pangs of hunger.

"What is it, Ichabod?" asked Smith, in a whisper.

"It's a hat, by heavens! a hat made into a basket and lowered here, full of cooked meat, I do believe, in my soul! Austin, it must be the ravens are trying to feed us, as they did Elijah in the wilderness—ah! I have it! Those ravens are Stonewall Bob! This is his hat! I know it by the charn-band upon it, and its size; and it's full—got a bushel o' something in. Glorious Stonewall Bob!"

"Be careful, Ichabod," cautioned Smith; "it may be another trick of the foe. The meat may be poisoned!"

This thought had not occurred to Flea; however, he emptied the contents of the hat upon the ground and then gave a little jerk or two. The jerk was repeated by whoever was at the end of the rope, sixty feet above, and then the hat was immediately drawn upward out of his hands.

Flea and Smith were now in a quandary what to do, but they finally concluded to let the matter rest until morning without saying anything to the others, and did so.

When daylight came, and all had retired behind the barricade, Ichabod brought out the meat, and laying it on a stone before his friends, said:

"Behold, what the ravens of night brought those who languish and hunger in the 'Fool's Trap'."

"Where on earth and in the name o' the great Rosycrusians did that come from?" exclaimed Old Tom, with staring eyes.

Ichabod told him the whole story, adding:

"But we were afraid it might be a trap and the meat poisoned, so we concluded to let the matter rest until daylight—"

"Do you s'pose Bob'd p'izen it?" interrupted Old Tom.

"No; we thought the Indians might have got hold of his hat and doctored some meat for us," Ichabod replied; "but there's no question it came from Bob, for I find *this* among the meat."

He handed Old Tom a piece of white wood that had been whittled flat, and upon the two sides a communication written in pencil. The wood was a mere chip, about four inches long by three in width. After Tom had looked it over, he handed it back to Flea, who read the communication thereon as follows:

"Boys, I'm onto your posish—accidently heard renegade and you talk last night—was close by—had notion to throw him into trap with you—went back ten miles to-day—shot deer and cooked old hat full—here it is—keep stiff backbone—stole two stout lariats to-day from Injuns' ponies—to-morrow night I'll be here again, if alive—be ready at midnight—will drop pebbles—end end of rope, and I'll draw

you out—the rope round waist, then jerk three times signal to pull, and I'll yank the feller up—don't squeal if rope pinches—Rattler come first—look out—be ready.
STONEWALL BOB.

"Lord! how I want to yell!" exclaimed Rattler; "but I'll wait. Glorious Robert Stonewall! Boys, I'm goin' to see if this venison's poisoned. If I should die, it's p'isoned, and if I live—"
"The rest of us will starve to death," broke in Ichabod Flea, as he watched Tom devour a piece of the meat.

"Boys," said Austin Smith, "we'd as well all die together, so every fellow lay hold and proceed to suicide."

The food was divided up and eaten with a keen relish, and as the effect of the feast was of a very agreeable nature, it was the unanimous opinion that Stonewall had prepared it.

And with their bodies thus strengthened, and their breasts filled with hope, they seated themselves behind the barricade to await the coming of night.

CHAPTER XL. THE TRAPPERS TRAPPED.

NEVER was a band of savages possessed of a more vindictive spirit against an enemy than Turtle-Face's was against Stonewall Bob and his friends. Strong in numbers a month before they had joined with Captain Vulture and his reckless followers and set forth on a grand marauding expedition that promised to enrich them all. But now, alas! they were returning to their old haunts with two-thirds of their companions left lifeless behind, and not one of the Vultures with them.

As to Kit Bandy, Tom Rattler and Stonewall Bob in particular, they attributed all their misfortunes, and now that they had, as they supposed, all but Bandy shut up in the head of the canyon, they had settled down to stay there until the whites surrendered or died of starvation.

Double guards were kept posted day and night, and during the latter a fire was kept burning to prevent the cunning foe stealing out among them during the darkness as they had done at the Belle Fourche Ford.

Their horses had been tethered to grass in a little valley half a mile away, and the loss of two lariats had been discovered, but as the horses were found wandering off in the hills the natural conclusion was that they had been lost.

Dirty-Dog Bill had been sent to converse with the whites in order to give them an opportunity to surrender if they so desired; but they soon discovered that the whites were as defiant as though they were the offensive instead of the defensive party.

The third night of the siege was on. A bright fire had been built and the usual evening festivities indulged in. Four men were kept constantly on guard and a fifth one was detailed to keep up the watch-fire.

When the hour of midnight came it found half of the warriors lying upon the ground asleep along the base of the bluffs within radius of the light. They slept with their guns, tomahawks and pistols on the ground at their sides. The four guards sat with their eyes riveted on the mouth of the passage leading to the "Trap," never for a single moment removing them.

One o'clock came and a deep, midnight stillness reigned in the camp, though the watch-fire flashed and flickered brightly as ever.

But suddenly—like a burst of crashing thunder—the crack of firearms broke the silence of the night and fairly shook the hills, and to this was added the wild, triumphant shout of desperate men as they came charging up the canyon into the camp, led by the giant Stonewall Bob!

In the agonies of death the guards went down at the first discharge of the hunters' rifles. The sleepers started in wild confusion and terror from their rest. Nasty-Dog Bill gave one glance at the advancing foe and then vanished into the narrow way leading to the Fool's Trap, for he saw and recognized Stonewall Bob. Tom Rattler and all those whom he had supposed were in the Trap, themselves, advancing upon them with death flashing from every hand!

The savages ran here and there in bewilderment—like panic-stricken sheep. Turtle-Face endeavored to quiet them and rally them to defense of the camp, but the brave chief fell in his efforts and his followers became a mob that the bullets of the whites mowed down like grass.

Once the red-skins were on the eve of making a fight. Some of them caught sight of White-Smoke Jim and his presence seemed to throw them into rage, and two of them dashed upon the young half-breed and before they could be stopped split his head with their tomahawks. But the next instant both of the avengers fell at the side of their victim, and a few moments later the bloody conflict, or rather massacre, for it was no fight, ended. A few of the Indians had escaped up the passage into the Fool's Trap but not one down the canyon. The surprise of the hunters had been complete, and, with the exception of White-Smoke, bloodless, Stonewall Bob had kept his promise and at the time designated appeared with his lariats and rescued his friends from the pit.

But now that they had overthrown the enemy where were the captive girls, Ruth and Gypsy? Where was Israel Danbaugh?

Not one of the three was to be seen. Some searched among the dead and dying for Danbaugh, while others searched the pockets and recesses of the canyon walls for the girls. But not one of them could be found!

A look of sad disappointment and grave fear clouded the faces of the party. The suspicion that they had been held back while Danbaugh made good his escape with the girls was forced upon them. What else could have become of them?

To make sure, however, of the girls, not being about, a more extended search was made, Austin Smith and One-Armed Phil being left to watch that none of the foe that had fled into the Trap came out.

To the Chicago detective the scene of death before him was most shocking. Most of the red skins had been killed outright, but among the wounded was a white renegade whose pitiful cries of pain arrested the attention of the detective, and going to where the man lay found that both his eyes had been shot

out, and that he was suffering a hundred deaths. Bending over him Smith said, in a tone full of sympathy:

"Old fellow, you're in a bad fix, ar'n't you?"
"Oh, God! kill me! kill me, and relieve my agony!" the renegade cried, lifting his arms in an imploring reach.

"No," replied Smith, "that would be murder."
"It'd be mercy!" fairly shrieked the sufferer; "finish your work, or give me a pistol!"

"They say the wages of sin are death," said Smith. "You brought this all upon yourselves. Had you let those girls alone—"

"Curse them girls!" raved out the renegade, "curse Israel Danbaugh and all his gang! They have been a scorpion's sting to us! We've been tools for them, and now we suffer, while Danbaugh with the girls goes free and unharmed!"

"Where's he gone to, and when?" asked Smith.
"He's not been with us for nearly a week," the dying renegade replied; "we had trouble one mornin' with one o' our men—White-Smoke Jim. The half-breed got away and Danbaugh got scared and he and four men, with the girls, struck north at once, calkerlatin' to make for the Bad Lands o' Montanny. Cuss 'em all—cuss 'em a thousand times! I hope you'll follow 'em, and send all to hell, whar they b'long."

Smith called up Stonewall Bob, and made known to him the dying renegade's story. The fellow was cross-questioned closely, and he adhered to the one straightforward story, and finally died expressing the hope that Danbaugh would be caught and punished.

The renegade's revelation filled the friends of the girls with almost hopeless despondency; but Old Tom Rattler came to the rescue, and soon revived their spirits, and inspired them with a renewed determination to continue the pursuit.

As they would be compelled to double back on their course several days' travel, before reaching the point where the renegade had claimed Danbaugh and party had left them for the Bad Lands, the pursuers resolved to make the journey on horseback, as the red-skins' ponies were now at their disposal. So Stonewall Bob and Rambling Dan were sent to bring six of the best animals to camp, for they proposed to start back at once.

When the ponies were brought up, and all ready to depart, Stonewall Bob ascended to the top of the Fool's Trap, and called down to Nasty-Dog Bill:

"I say, down there, Nasty-Canine William, how are you gettin' along?"

"Go to blazes!" was the renegade's reply, coupled with a few choice oaths.

"Well, ole fel," Bob continued, "you're havin' hard luck. You see how uncertain life is. Now we could keep you down in that Fool's Trap till the buzzards carried you out in pieces; but you're not worth the pains. What I come to tell you is that we're goin' to depart hence, and you can go down and take care of your wounded friends; then soon as convenient go out and shoot yourself."

Having thus advised the outlaw, Stonewall returned to his friends, and in five minutes the party was mounted, and on its way back through the hills bound for the Bad Lands of Montana.

CHAPTER XLI. A HAPPY SURPRISE.

On the morning of the seventh day after the departure of Tom Rattler and his party from the scene of their last battle with Turtle-Face's band, the pursuers found themselves traversing the southern extremity of that weird and desolate waste known as the "Bad Lands."

They had found, as the dying outlaw had told them, where Danbaugh and his party with Ruth and Gypsy had left the red-skins and turned north; and from that point they had followed the villains' trail into the Bad Lands.

With strong hopes of overtaking the scoundrels soon, Tom and his friends pushed into the hilly, brush-covered waste, Rattler, himself, acting as trail-master most of the time.

The first half of their first day in this desolate region had not yet passed when the watchful eyes of Stonewall Bob discovered a thin column of smoke rising from among the hills a mile or so before them.

A halt was immediately called, and Rattler and Bob, leaving their horses with their friends, went forward on foot to make a reconnaissance.

As they approached the vicinity of the rising smoke they discovered ten horses, most of them with saddles on, grazing in a little opening near where the smoke was rising from a thicket of wild plum bushes.

"Them don't all look like outlaws' hosses, Stonewall," Old Tom said after a careful survey of the animals. "The saddles on some o' them look like soldiers' outfits."

"And so they must be," declared Stonewall, as he saw a man in blue emerge from the thicket, take a look at the horses and then return to the bushes.

"It are, by the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Tom.

But notwithstanding this discovery the scouts continued to advance cautiously, keeping under cover until they were within twenty paces of the camp, when they saw two men whom they recognized as soldiers they had left at Camp Kit Bandy.

Without further delay they boldly approached the soldiers, both of whom recognized the scouts the instant they saw them and gave them a hearty greeting.

"Tom Rattler and Stonewall Bob!" exclaimed one of them, advancing toward the scouts with extended hands.

"The same, my gallant blue-coat," replied Tom; "but what on the earth are you fellers doin' up here?"

"Hunting girl-thieves?" answered the soldier.
"The same here," said Rattler; "but when did you leave camp? how's everybody there?—how's Ole Kit Bandy?—how's—"

"Kari-topher Ko-lumbuss Bandy is fairly well. I thank you," said a familiar voice, and turning, Old Tom was rendered speechless with surprise by the appearance, from behind a cluster of bushes, of Old Kit Bandy with Ruth Graves upon one side and Gypsy on the other!

Tom rubbed his eyes, and blinked at the trio, glanced at Stonewall and the soldiers, muttering:

"Rosycrusians! dost my ole eye see what they be-hold? Dost I—"

"Oh, yes, Thomas," exclaimed Kit, "you're all right, but I got the bulge on you this time, you bloomin' ole pirate!"

The soldiers laughed, while Stonewall Bob advanced and shook hands with Kit and the smiling, happy maidens.

Then Tom came forward and grasped the extended hand of the old detective and shook it till the joints fairly cracked.

"God bless you, Kit!" he said, his face beaming with joy, "there's hopes o' you bein' a useful man yit! I congratulate you! I hail you with joy! You're lookin' thin about the gills, but just as handsome as ever. You've been doin' noble work, but, tell me quick, what ye did with the gentleman that employed the great Mountain Detective to hunt down John Ross-grove—I mean Israel Danbaugh?"

"Come, and I'll show you," answered Kit, and he led the way around the bushes to where Danbaugh sat handcuffed and guarded by a soldier.

"Oh, hol!" Tom exclaimed, "and 'tis thus we meet again, Israel! Well, well, well!"

Danbaugh made no reply. The villain was completely broken down. He could now see the end of his long life of evil close at hand.

Kit took Tom aside and told him how he and the soldiers had effected the girls' release. A hunter had come down to Camp Bandy and reported seeing four men and two girls pushing northward toward the Bad Lands, and, from what they could gather from the hunter, Kit and the Surgeon Scout made up their minds it was a party of outlaws, with Ruth and Gypsy. At any rate, the matter was thought to be worth looking after; so Kit, having sufficiently recovered from his injuries, with three soldiers, set out for the Bad Lands. About one hundred miles north of where Tom and Bob met them, they found the party, killed all but Danbaugh and saved the girls, and that, too, before the unsuspecting villains could fire a shot.

When Kit had finished his story, Tom in turn narrated briefly the incidents of their pursuit of the foe, and how Danbaugh came to give them the drop.

As the party had only halted for dinner they were soon in the saddle again on their homeward march. Coming to where the rest of Tom's party were waiting, a short halt was made for the greeting of friends, and then the journey was resumed.

In the course of many days' travel the camp was reached without incident worthy of note, and their arrival was the occasion for general rejoicing on the part of everybody—save only the now most abject Israel.

All the wounded were found on the rapid road to recovery except Jack Bramble. Contrary to the doctor's first expectations, the outlaw's recovery had been attended with troublesome complications. Some thought his mental troubles had much to do with his continued physical weakness, for he was constantly begging the Surgeon Scout to let him die.

After a few days' rest the whole party broke camp and started for the fort, where they arrived in due time, though the journey had been a hard one for Jack Bramble.

Austin Smith left at once with Danbaugh for Rushville, where he had the villain placed in jail to await the action of the law; then he returned to the fort for Bramble, who, by this time, was able to make the trip, though far from well.

And while we are writing of Danbaugh and the Endicott murder, we will dismiss the subject entirely with the following summary:

Danbaugh was tried and convicted upon the evidence of Rosenberg and Quinlan, the latter being found in Olympia, Washington Territory, as the chief conspirator in the murder of Henry Endicott. He was sentenced to prison for life, while Bramble and Quinlan got twenty years each, but Bramble died of his wounds before he reached the prison cell.

Within a week after his incarceration Israel Danbaugh took his own life by hanging himself with a rope made of strips of his blanket; but before he did so, remorse compelled him to make a written statement of the crime he had been guilty of against Endicott and Ross-grove. He admitted that, through an unscrupulous English lawyer who had first discovered Ross-grove's being the first heir to the fortune, he had been induced to try and prevent Ross-grove coming into possession of it. But, how was it to be accomplished without creating suspicion he knew not.

For two years they managed to keep the existence of the fortune from Ross-grove, and finally, when the latter had quarreled with Endicott he—Danbaugh—conceived the idea of fixing the crime of murder upon Ross-grove, and with the assistance of the two ready tools, Rosenberg and Quinlan, who have seen how near he came to success, and yet how the pitfall he dug for another became his own dishonored grave.

John Ross-grove was thus exonerated and restored to the good consideration of his fellow-men. There were those, however who, out of mistaken kindness, were disposed to censure him for fleeing when he knew he was innocent, holding that for him to have remained with his trust in God would have wrought in some way proof of his innocence.

But the more matter-of-fact friends thought he did the best thing possible, for, with the evidence against him, false as it was, yet seemingly conclusive, the gibbet only three weeks away, there was no time for sentiment or cringing appeals to an inexorable fate. That he was right in the course he pursued, although he had suffered many privations, was proven in the happy termination of the whole affair.

CHAPTER XLII.

STONEWALL WINS THE PRIZE.

ONCE more we will return to our friends.

When the time approached for their departure from the fort, a feeling of regret and some uncertainty pervaded their minds and hearts, and to John Ross-grove and Mahlon Graves it amounted almost to a dread.

They knew that their future ways lay apart, and

that Ruth must decide between them as to which she should go with. It was a delicate matter they could not bring themselves to discuss together. Each in his own heart conceded the other's claim to the affections of the lovely girl, and each made up his mind to accept whatever the future might decree him. But the suspense so prayed upon Ross-grove's mind that he finally went to Kit Bandy and asked his counsel in the matter.

"That's exactly what Graves asked me yesterday," Kit confessed, "and I see it war worryin' him mightly. I do hope you men 'll not let any feelin' spring up between you after all you've passed through."

"God forbid it, Kit!" exclaimed Ross-grove; "Mahon Graves has been a devoted father to my child. She has grown up in his family and under his protecting care. She has known no other father, and loves him as a father; and yet, after all my years of banishment—"

"You in turn, Ross-grove," interrupted Kit, "have been rearing and protecting two lovely girls who love you as a father. You'd not be left alone even though Ruth should prefer to go with Graves."

"I will admit, Bandy, I love those girls, and yet, Ruth is of my own flesh and blood, and that makes a difference that no one but a parent can fully realize."

"That's true, I suppose, Mr. Ross-grove. But, see here: there's a very easy way to settle this matter 'twixt you and Graves."

"How, Kit, is that?"

"Let Ruth decide which of the two she'll go with."

"That would be a good way providing Ruth was willing; but she is so sensitive and kind-hearted that it will be like death to her to have to make such a decision."

"But if she will, you'll abide her decision?"

"Yes, most assuredly—I could not, nor would not do otherwise."

"Then I will speak with Graves, and if he consents to this, we'll soon have the matter settled one way'r t'other."

An hour later Ross-grove was summoned to the room in which all our friends were assembled, and when he had been seated, Old Kit arose, and turning to Ruth said:

"Miss Ruth, as we're soon to separate, there's a duty o' no pleasant character devolv'in' on you. You are more fortunate than most pretty girls in that you've got two fathers, but as their ways lay in opposite directions, you can't live with both, and it are best for your happiness and theirs that you now decide which one it shall be you go with."

"That will be a hard matter for me to determine," Ruth answered, thoughtfully; "I love both of my dear fathers, and have been thinking all this over, and I think I have a solution of the difficulty that will be acceptable to both of them."

"And what's that?" queried Bandy.

"Robert Comstock," she answered, with a deep blush, "has asked me to be his wife, and as I love him, too, I accepted his proposal."

"Robert Comstock is worthy the love of any woman in the land!" exclaimed Mahlon Graves.

"Then, so be it!" added John Ross-grove, with an air of happy resignation.

"Glory!" shouted Old Rattler, and Rambling Dan clapped his hands in joy.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, with an affected look of disappointment, "that cooks my goose again. Bob Comstock, you lucky rascal, I was just on the eve o' proposin' to Miss Ruth myself. But, I'm always behind—always!" with a long drawn sigh.

An outburst of laughter that set everybody in the very best of spirits followed the jovial old detective's absurd declarations.

"You can allers count on Kit Bandy bein' in love with the weemin'," Old Rattler remarked.

"I confess the weakness, Rattler," Kit replied; "I'll admit that I do like the ladies, but, I allers git left somehow, and in this case I'm left badly—not high enough gals to go 'round 'less I gobble onto Gypsy, and—"

"You ole pirate!" exclaimed Rattler, "you'll frighten the child to death talkin' like a Red Vultur."

"Ob, no; I know Mr. Bandy's just in fun, for he's always plaguing me," responded Gypsy, her dark eyes sparkling with good nature.

Since the meeting of One-armed Phil and Margery Ashton, their old-time affection had grown anew, and the outcome of it was that they, too, had pledged their love to each other before leaving the fort.

At length the day for departure from the fort came, and after an affectionate leave-taking of the soldiers and the great-hearted Surgeon Scout, the journey toward civilization was begun.

Old Kit and Rattler went with the folks to a point far southward beyond any possible danger, and there announced that they must bid all good-by and return to the fields of exciting labor in the mountains.

With a feeling of downright grief the party realized that they must separate from those two brave, heroic and jolly old bordermen.

The hunter and detectives were shaking hands around, with their friends, when they came to where Stonewall Bob and Ruth were standing.

"Stonewall Robert," said Old Kit, "young pard, it's hard to give you up, but then you've fallen into good hands—and it are in a good cause you quit the great range for the brighter, and I trust, happier life o' bliss. Out o' our expedition in search o' the criminal, John Ross-grove, you, Bob, git all the reward—a big, grand prize worth a round billion o' dollars in gold. I know you'll be happy, Bob, with such a wife as Ruth'll make you—that is, if you do your part by her, and if he doesn't Miss Ruth, you send me word and I'll go straight down to your house and whale him most tumultuously, and take you away from him, and git you a divorce and—"

"Oh, I do hope you and Rattler and Ichabod will all come often to see us," urged Ruth, her eyes filling with tears, while a sad smile hovered about her lips.

"If the good Lord spares us we will," responded Kit, his own eyes growing moist; "so, good-by, Bob—good-by, Ruth!"

He gave a hand to each, and in the gratefulness of her young heart Ruth bent her head and with the

tears still falling from her eyes, kissed the old man's hand.

Without another word Kit turned and walked away. Coming to where John Ross-grove stood trying to quiet his feelings for the final parting, he said:

"Well, Zeke, that's an end to all things, and I suppose this is the end of our sojourn together."

"Rather the end of our expedition criminal-hunting," responded Ross-grove.

"Exactly!" returned Bandy, "and we got him, too, but he weren't the feller we started out after, thank the Lord. But, if ever in the future you want any detective work done call on me at my office."

"Yes; Bandy's s'ich a stupendous ole detective!" put in Tom Rattler, with a smile; "employed a man to hunt himself to the gal us. Oh, tortures! Ross-grove don't ever tell that on Kitee—don't give the to-muluous old mountain detective away; and may the rest o' your days be crowded from mornin' till night with joy and happiness. Good-by, Ross-grove."

Ross-grove warily shook the hand of each; then the three old bordermen mounted their horses and in silence rode slowly away toward the west.

THE END.

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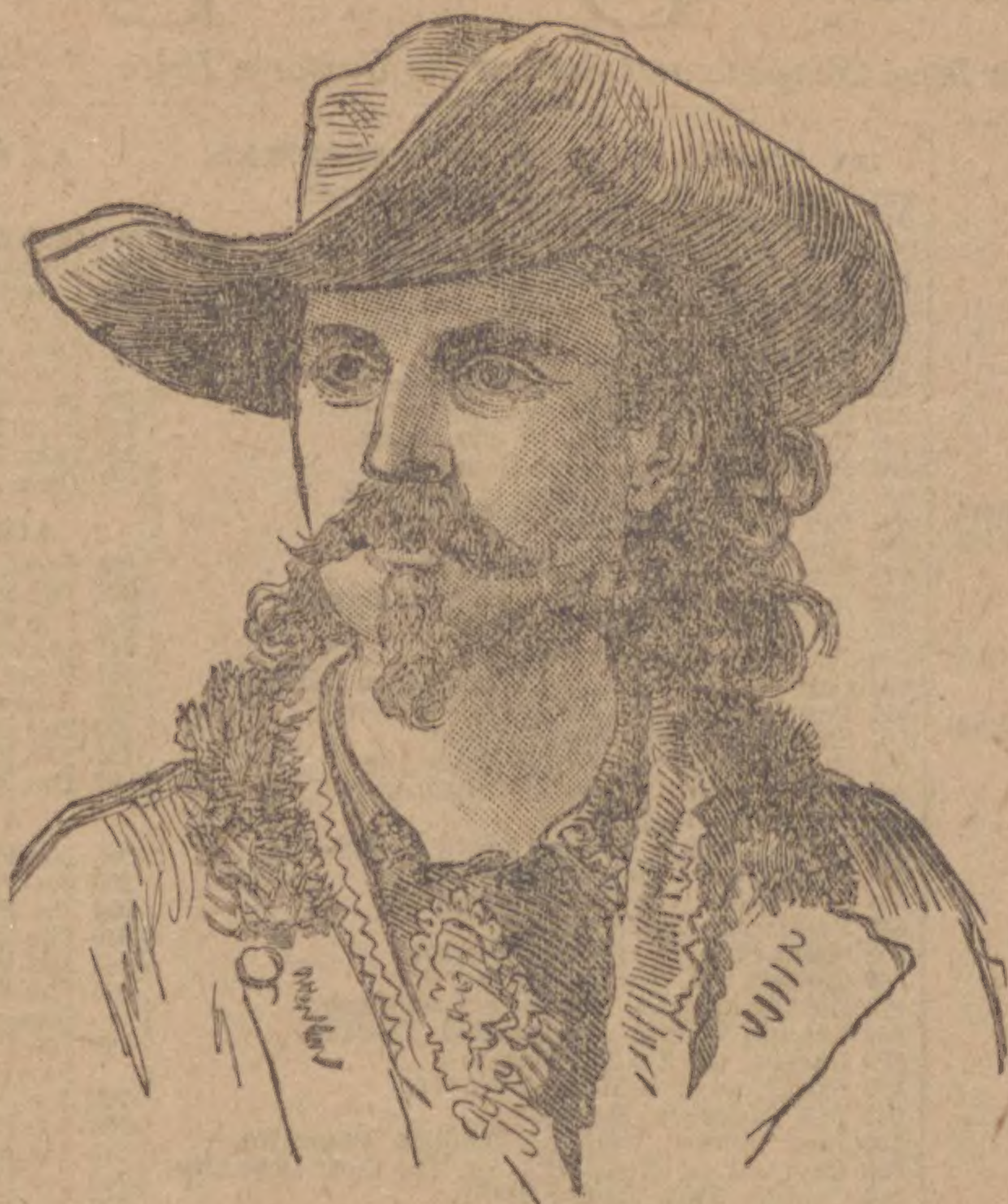
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